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Ellisheva Gold

by
Leanne Lieberman

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
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Canada

Abstract

My novel, *Ellisheva Gold*, tells the story of an Orthodox Jewish teenager living in Toronto. Ellisheva, or Ellie never doubts her strict religious upbringing until she falls in love with another girl at her grandmother's cottage. Aware that her homosexuality and Jewish observance clash, Ellie feels forced to either change her sexuality or leave her community.

While Ellie finds Judaism limiting, her mother, Chana, is convinced she has a messianic role to play. Chana tries to help other Jews be more observant, and expresses her religious devotion through song. Both Chana and Ellie ultimately violate the taboos of their community and are forced to find alternative outlets for their spiritual, religious life. Although Ellie feels there is no way to be both gay and Jewish, her mother offers an alternative concept of God that helps Ellie find a place for herself as a Queer Jew. *Ellisheva Gold* explores the limitations of a literal biblical interpretation in our modern day.

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Summer

Chapter 1

With a heave of her foot Neshama shoves an enormous blue canvas duffel bag down the stairs. It slides sloth-like down a few steps and then stops, caught by the wooden banister.

"What, are you leaving forever?" I ask.

"I wish." Neshama smooths a long blond curl behind her ear and adjusts her fake designer sunglasses on her head.

I snort. "Hard to travel with that bag."

She flaps her T-shirt away from her stomach. "Will you pleeeese help me?" She smiles, tilting her head to the side.

I sigh and climb up the stairs. Neshama started packing weeks ago, randomly throwing T-shirts, fashion magazines, eyeliner and a half dozen lipsticks into her bag. This morning she was still stuffing romance novels under the bulging zipper.

We each pick up a strap of the duffel bag and half lift, half drag it. As we lug the bag into the front hall I knock my elbow on the newel post, pain shooting up my arm. Neshama tries not to snicker. Even though she's two years older and entering her last year of high school, I'm already four inches taller. That's four inches more gangly arms, rangy legs, pointy elbows and bony knees.

"That's all you're taking?" She looks at my small red suitcase by the front door.

"It's just going to be Bubbie and me."

Our Abba rushes down the stairs behind us with a large canvas suitcase, sweating through his white shirt.

"Ellie, go help your mother please."

"What's the matter now?"

"Something about her sun hat."

I've already refolded the clothes in Ima's suitcase twice: last night and this morning. Ima has been preparing for months to go to Israel. She made lists: Imodium, film, laundry soap, walking shoes. She went shopping, made neat piles on our dining room table. This morning she was still rearranging, randomly sticking things into her bag, wrinkling her blouses, shoving socks and bras into corner pockets.

"Anyway, she needs help. We all need to be ready before you do." Abba stops. His eyes flicker to Neshama's legs. "Neshama, is that what you're wearing to camp?" He runs his fingers through his curly brown beard.

"Yeah, what's wrong?"

"Your skirt."

Neshama peers over her shoulder at the slit in the back. "It's fine."

Abba frowns. "You can see the back of your knees."

Neshama sighs. "It's hot outside and everyone wears skirts like this at camp."

"Go and change."

They stand glaring at each other. I slink up the stairs.

"Ima?" I peer into her dim bedroom. The curtains are drawn, the air conditioner turned off. Ima sits on the end of her bed, hands slack in her lap, her pointy shoulders hunched. Her open suitcase is a twisted mess of clothes.

"Are you ready to go?"

"I'm not sure."

"Abba says you can't find your hat."

"Oh, I found it." She holds up a crushed straw hat with floppy yellow chrysanthemums on the brim.

"Okay, so can we go then? Bubbie is going to be here any minute." I sit down on the bed next to her, peer at her drawn face, the deep circles under her eyes.

"I'm sure I've forgotten something."

"What?"

"Well, I'm not sure."

"Do you have your toothbrush?"

"Yes."

"Plane ticket? Passport?"

"Abba has those."

"Well, then don't worry. Everything else you can get in Israel."

Abba leans into the room. "Are you coming?" He drums his fingers on the wall, looking at Ima. "Your mother's here."

"I'll be there in a second," Ima says. She turns to me. "Are you sure you're going to be okay with Bubbie for a whole month?"

"Totally fine. Don't worry." I squeeze Ima's hand and zip up her suitcase, stopping to refold a blouse. Ima sighs and then tucks a chestnut curl under her scarf. She adjusts the belt on her new, long-sleeved sundress and follows me downstairs.

"*Nu*, so are we all ready?" Bubbie says. She pushes an enormous pair of rhinestone studded sunglasses up her forehead and settles them carefully in her silver hairdo.

Bubbie, Ima's mom, is our country club grandmother. She plays bridge, volunteers for Hadassah, and meets friends for golf or tennis twice a week. Today she wears a white polo shirt, beige walking shorts and pink high heels.

"We just have to say *t'fillah ha'derech*," Abba says.

"There's really no time-" Bubbie protests.

"It'll just take a second." Abba whips his prayer book out of his fanny pack and starts chanting the prayer for safe travel, his voice slightly nasal. We stand in the tiny front hall surrounded by luggage. I chant the prayer under my breath. Neshama rolls her eyes. I notice she has changed into a different skirt. Bubbie wiggles her toes, the perfect pale pink ovals peeking out of her open toe pumps.

Abba finishes the prayer and Ima says, "Amen. Now we sit."

"Oh, c'mon this is ridiculous," Bubbie says. "You're going to miss your flight."

"Just one minute." Ima ushers us into the living room.

"Ima, the bus is going to leave without me," Neshama wails.

Ima smiles and sits next to Abba on the beige sofa. Neshama, Bubbie and I wait in the doorway.

A moment passes and then Ima smiles. "Okay, let's go."

Outside the sun glares, the air thick and muggy. I leave my suitcase on the front porch and help Neshama load her duffel bag into Bubbie's trunk. Abba piles his and Ima's suitcases on top and squishes the lid closed.

"Okay," Bubbie says, "pile in."

Abba hands me a shoebox lined with wax paper. "Knishes and rugelach."

"Thanks."

He clumsily smooths my hair, his wedding ring grazing my forehead. "You'll be careful, right?"

"Yes Abba."

Ima squeezes my arm and stands on tiptoe to kiss me. "Have a good time at the cottage."

Neshama hugs me. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"To the shul, the airport, and then I'll be back to pick you up in an hour," Bubbie says.

They pull away waving and smiling.

I sit on the front porch next to my suitcase and stretch out my long legs, wrap my skinny arms around me. The humidity makes my straight hair flip out at the ends. A sticky layer of sweat forms between my almost touching thighs.

My red vinyl suitcase holds two skirts - one khaki, one denim - a saggy one piece bathing suit, seven pairs of cotton briefs, two beige A cup bras, a rain slicker, my old gray fleece sweater, and five pastel T-shirts in mauve, peach, baby blue, yellow, and mint green. In the outside

compartment is my *Encyclopedia of the Ocean*, *Linnaeus: The Man and His Work*, *Frogs of Ontario*, binoculars, one Hello Kitty notebook, six HB #2 pencils, three ballpoint pens, a magnifying glass and my *Complete Artscroll Siddur*. I've been ready to go for weeks.

I can hear endless cars and trucks whizzing by from Eglinton Avenue. Weeds push up through the walkway to our house, a small spindly tree wilts on our square plot of lawn. The heat rises thick and squalid with Toronto summer pollution. I get up and step into the shade of the front porch and settle into an old tan wicker chair, pick at the loose straw on the armrest. Only one more hour, and I'm done with the city for the summer.

I'm leaving asphalt, concrete and traffic. I'm leaving polyester school skirts stained with sweat from sitting on vinyl seats. I'm leaving *Torah* and *Mishna* classes for green, trees, the lake and blue blue sky.

When Bubbie pulls up in her white Cadillac an hour later, she rolls down the window and leans her head out. "Are you ready kid?" I nod and she releases the trunk. "Let's blow this pop stand."

I drop my bag in the car and hop into the icy cool beige and maroon leather interior.

Two more hours of traffic: stalls on the 401, rubber necking SUVs, pick-up trucks with ATVs, old Volkswagens with fancy canoes. Exhaust shimmers in the heat off the asphalt. Off the collector lanes, and then back on. Bottleneck at Pickering. An old Mustang with teenage boys snakes up the centre shoulder, BMWs politely honking. We pass mini malls edged against Lake Ontario, industrial areas, the occasional rolling hill. Bubbie plays Marvin Gaye, sings, *Can't help myself. I love you and nobody else*.

Then, finally, we turn off the 401 and there are just trees and rocks and bushes, the occasional marsh, black stumps growing up through the water like prehistoric remnants of forest. I want to roll down the window and let the fresh air blow my hair back, but I know Bubbie will complain about the wind on her neck.

I twist sideways in my seat, lean against the door. A smile sneaks across my lips.

"Do you think it'll be warm enough to swim?" I ask.

"Of course. I bought you a suit. I wasn't sure if you had one."

"Oh, thank you."

Bubbe sighs, "You don't have one?"

"No, I have one. It's just plain black."

"We're almost at the turnoff. Do you want to stop for something to eat?"

"Uh, no thanks."

"You're not hungry?"

"No, not really."

"Not even for French fries?" Bubbe makes a face.

"They're probably not kosher."

"What about a salad?"

"Bubbe, the whole restaurant wouldn't be kosher."

She shakes her head and pats my shoulder. "If that's what you want."

Bubbe has packed an entire store of kosher food for me, jars of pickles, smoked meat, loaves of rye bread, cream cheese, tubs of coleslaw, hummus, fresh pasta that we will have to eat by the end of the week. She promised she'd prepare only kosher food.

Bubbe finally turns off the highway and maneuvers her old Cadillac slowly down a gravel path. I roll down the window, hang out my head. Frogs chirp in the marsh, and then I see water by the edge of the forest, or is it the other way round?

I am out of the car before Bubbe even turns off the motor. "Come and see how nice the cottage is," she calls.

"Later," I yell over my shoulder. I run down the winding gravel path past the wooden cottage, out of the darkness of the fir trees across the grass to the shore. Water shimmers in the early evening light, lapping against the giant slabs of rock, a cool breeze ruffling the surface,

blowing my sticky hair off my face. I reach the end of the dock, sit for a second and then lie down. The crickets sing. I inhale the scent of lake, letting my limbs ease into the rough wood of the dock, dangling my hands in the fresh cool water.

When I wake early the next morning, I can see slow, heavy mist twist over the glassy surface of the water from my window. I slip out of my sheets and quietly pad across the living room floor so as not to wake Bubbie. Across the porch, down the stairs, through the dewy grass and past the hammock hanging between two maple trees to the water. I sit on the dock, shivering in my fleece. I pull my knees into my chest, the dock cold under my bare feet. Across the bay the island is obscured by the thick mist. To my left, sun slants over the marsh of tree stumps and cattails. Out in the bay beyond the point, a family of loons slowly disappears into the thick vapour.

Bubbie rents this cottage every summer but the first and only other time I've been here I was seven. I'd never seen a lake, a forest, or wild flowers, had never left the city. We arrived in the evening, our bodies stuck to the hot plastic car seats, the metal seatbelts burning our skin. When we pulled off the highway onto the gravel road down to the cottage there was a sudden cool breeze through the deep green of the trees. Abba parked the car by the woodpile and Bubbie came down to meet us. It was twilight; the first stars were appearing in the pinkish sky.

"Come," Bubbie had said to Neshama and me. She took us down to the water's edge and we waded in beside the dock. I nudged small snail shells with my toes. The island across the bay was covered with pines, the occasional birch gleaming white. "I've never seen so many trees!" I exclaimed.

"Or mosquitoes," Neshama added.

"Can we go swimming?"

"Sure, I'll come with you." Bubbie stripped off her sundress, and waded in naked. Ima and Abba had gone into the cottage to unpack. Neshama and I looked at each other, giggled and

took off our clothes. We eased our naked bodies into the water, our toes sliding into the viscous mud, darkness enveloping us, washing away the city. I fell in love with the wet cool on my hot skin.

I floated on my back looking up at the sky, listening to the waves slap against the shore, looking up at the glimmering sky, the stars like a mosaic of lights, brighter than I'd ever seen before.

Abba was furious when he came down to the water. "You have bathing suits, why aren't you wearing them!"

"Oh, who cares?" Bubbie said to him. "They're just little girls. No one is around."

"And you?"

Bubbie wrapped the towel around herself tighter. "So, don't look."

"When Moshiach comes, there'll be time for swimming naked."

"Would you just relax and forget about your religious *mishigas* for a day? Enough waiting."

Ima said nothing, just sat tight-lipped on the porch, sweating in her long-sleeved blouse.

Abba packed us off in a hurry.

I have been waiting to come back ever since. I have been waiting for a breeze through the pine trees on a hot summer afternoon and the chorus of peeping frogs mating in the swamp.

Waiting is in my blood. My parents are professionals at it. After years of planning, they are finally in Israel for the summer. Only Bubbie waits for no one, and no thing. Life is to live now. Enjoy. "What?" Bubbie says, "I should sit and wait for Schneerson to die and come back?"

I stand up on the end of the dock with my prayer book and sing "*Shma Yisroel Adonai A'lochecha, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God.*" My voice echoes across the water.

I have been waiting to pray outside. In Toronto, surrounded by paved streets, it seems silly to pray for rain for crops. Once I sneaked out to pray in the ravine, but people kept coming by and I didn't sing out loud.

I chant, "*Ve'ahafatah, adonai*."

The screen door slams. Bubbie comes out wearing a long, faded blue T-shirt, her legs bare. She strides down to the dock, sheds the T-shirt, revealing a saggy pink swimsuit. "*Take me to the river, wash me down,*" she bellows, and then dives into the water. The mist has lifted and the sky and water are cerulean blue. I close my prayer book and watch Bubbie's arms scissor powerfully through the water in even strokes. She swims out to the middle of the bay until I can barely see her, just the white of her hair. She waves to me, then swims out of sight. I try to continue my prayers. I keep glancing up anxiously until she comes back.

Bubbie's stroke propels her through the water, her arms rotating in an even rhythm. She swims up to the ladder, her breath deep and heavy. Pulling herself onto the dock, her arm muscles flex underneath her wrinkled skin.

"I didn't know you could do that."

Bubbie wipes water from her face with her towel. "You mean swim?"

"Yeah."

"You know I go to the club all the time."

I shrug, "I thought you did water aerobics or something."

She laughs, "What made you think that?"

"I don't know."

Bubbie towels off her hair and bathing suit.

"I've never seen that suit before."

She shrugs. "I only wear it here. Are you going in?"

I shake my head and sigh. "I wish I could swim like you."

"I'll teach you."

"Really?"

“We’ll be here a month, what else are you going to do?” She plucks at her bathing suit straps. “Besides, it’s important to stay in shape. All those rabbis with their *bochels* and high cholesterol. I’d be happy to help you improve your stroke.”

Neshama is always going on about exercise too. She and Ima both have tiny bird bodies. Ima really does look like a small white sparrow, her back bones poking through her skin. Neshama works out. Lifts weights. Abba’s always bugging her about what she wears at the gym. Neshama says she wears track pants and a T-shirt, but I’ve seen exercise tights when she does her wash.

Neshama has a tight little bum, and stomach muscles that she can clench together in a hard ribbon down her belly when she leans forward and grunts.

Bubbie heads back up to the cottage and I follow behind her even though I’m not finished my prayers. The sun beats down and my stomach feels empty.

The cottage is a dark log cabin with a screened-in porch. The kitchen has open shelves instead of cupboards and an old stainless steel sink. In the main room a large stone fireplace banks the far wall and several old orange recliners and a reddish-brown couch droop in the centre of the room. A stack of *Life* magazines from the 70’s fills a wooden crate beside the couch. An old lantern and pair of cross-country skis hang above the fireplace.

Bubbie pours herself a cup of coffee and grabs a Popsicle stick from a package in a drawer.

“Coffee?” she offers.

“No thanks.”

“Popsicle stick?”

“Pardon?”

“Just kidding.” She brandishes the Popsicle stick at me. “They’re so I don’t smoke.” She pops the stick in her mouth and chews with her back teeth. “I will not smoke today.” Her hair is flat on one side, her eyelids bare of eye shadow or liner. I have never seen her without makeup.

"Bubbie, you quit smoking five years ago."

"Yes, but now I'm stuck on the sticks." She puts bread in the toaster.

I watch Bubbie chew. "So, what do you do here?"

Bubbie runs her hands through her hair, rests a hip against the counter. "Swim in the morning, read in the afternoon, obsess over birds. Yellow finch." She points out over the porch to the bird feeder.

"You know about birds?"

Bubbie nods. "What are you going to do this summer?"

I sip my orange juice and look out the sliding glass doors. "I don't know. Look for frogs, practice swimming."

Bubbie hands me a piece of toast. I get out the peanut butter and smooth it on. I quickly whisper a blessing before taking a bite.

"You know, you don't have to do that here."

"The *brucha*?"

"Yeah, I'm not going to report you."

I shrug. "It's just habit."

"Is that why do you do it?"

I take a bite of toast. "Yeah, and you know, to be closer to *Hashem*."

Bubbie chokes on her coffee. "God?"

"Yeah, God."

"And what do you think that is?"

I pause mid-bite, my brow crinkling. "*Hashem*? You know, God is just God. Creator, commandments, all that stuff."

Bubbie gawks at me. "You really believe all that?"

"What's not to believe?"

I give Bubbie a fuzzy answer because I don't really spend much time thinking about God. Keeping kosher and saying prayers is just normal to me. Bubbie has me confused with Ima and Abba, who are re-born Jews. Every ritual they keep is about "loving God" and "being spiritual."

God is too big an idea to even hold in my head all at one time, vaporous and well, enormous. It's like trying to think about the whole ocean all at once. I can only focus on one mollusk or seaweed tendril at a time.

After breakfast Bubbie gives me a new bathing suit, a blue two-piece. "A bikini?" I say incredulously.

"It's not a bikini. It's two pieces, tank style. I thought you'd be too long in the body for a one-piece."

I stare at it.

In the bedroom I pull on the suit, try and see myself in the small mirror above the wooden bureau. I trace my fingers over the scooped neckline. The bottoms are cut low over the belly and high over my narrow hips. I lift my arms over my head, striking a pose in front of the mirror.

Down on the dock a gentle breeze laps the water into small waves. I hang onto the ladder, trying to keep my feet out of the weeds.

Bubbie stands on the dock bent at the waist, arms rotating. "You need to cup the water with your hands and then pull back. Two motions, cup and pull."

I stand in the muck, circling my arms.

"Good. Now kick your feet at the same time."

"Now?"

"Sure."

I take a deep breath and plunge into the dark water. My arms crash over my head, cup and pull. I draw in another gasp of air, hold it, drag the other arm. Feet, kick feet. Arms, cup and pull. I forget to breathe. Water rushes up my nose. I surface spitting and coughing, trying to keep my feet out of the jelly-like sand.

"Good," Bubbie sings out from her deck chair. "Good try."

I practice again and again until I am blue and shivering. "Enough," Bubbie says.

"Enough for today." She passes me a towel and I collapse into a deck chair.

"Look at those chicken arms."

"What?"

Bubbie pokes my upper arm. "Chicken arms. You need muscles to swim."

I examine my bony arms.

"You should do pushups, every day. Then you'll be cutting through that water like a fish."

Bubbie goes up for drinks. I get down on my chest and try to push my body up. I grunt, but nothing moves. I roll up my towel under my legs and try pushing up from my knees.

"Keep your butt down, back flat." Bubbie puts a glass of lemonade down on the dock for me.

I try again, my face burning, heart pounding.

"That's better. You'll look like Charles Atlas in no time."

Whoever that is. I collapse onto my belly and peer at the dark green shadows the wooden slats of the dock throw onto the water.

Bubbie picks up a biography of Henry Kissinger, the brim of her floppy straw hat with the fake pink carnations shading her face. I drop my head back, let the heat seep into me. I too will dive, will swim all the way across the bay.

Friday afternoon I pull out a set of small candle holders and a bottle of kosher wine from the box Abba packed for me. "It's *Shabbos*," I announce to Bubbie.

"Well, what do you know. I lose track of the days up here." Bubbie opens the freezer and tosses a bag of *Challah* buns at me. I catch the bag and take out two to defrost. A few frozen poppy seeds flake off.

If we were at home there'd be a special meal, chicken or salmon filets, and a white tablecloth. Tonight we're only having pasta salad and corn-on-the-cob on the picnic table outside.

When it's time to sit down to dinner, the sun just starting to descend, Bubbie says, "Okay, let's do those blessings."

I stand up reluctantly and whisper the blessing. I've never blessed the Shabbos candles without Ima and Neshama singing beside me. Bubbie watches me, not joining in, her arms crossed against her chest.

"Are you done?" she asks when I stop praying.

"You're supposed to say amen."

"Amen." She gets up to get the corn before I can bless the wine or the cold rocks of bread.

If Ima and Abba were here we'd sing a song before dinner. Abba would bless me, laying his hands on my head and telling me he hoped I turn out like Sarah, Rachel Rebecca and Leah. Neshama and I'd harmonize *zemirot* after dinner and there'd be Abba's apple cake or rugelach for dessert.

Bubbie turns on the radio while I'm still chanting the prayer after meals. I glare at her and leave her to finish cleaning up herself. Down on the dock I slap a few mosquitoes and then decide to go up to bed.

I say goodnight to Bubbie as I pass her in the living room.

"Sleep well," she says.

In my dark room, I extend my arms, feeling for the bed. I bump my knee against the bed frame.

"Are you all right in there?" Bubbie asks from the living room.

"Fine."

"Do you want me to come in and turn on the light?"

"No thanks."

"Can I do it anyway?"

"No, that's OK." I climb into bed.

Bubbe sighs. "I'll get you a night light for next week."

"Oh, good idea."

I don't turn the lights on because *Shabbos*, the Sabbath, is a day of rest. All work is forbidden including driving, cooking and lighting fires. Observant Jews don't turn on and off lights, use the phone or radio because electricity is like lighting a fire. We even unscrew the light bulb in the fridge so the light doesn't turn on every time you open it. We pre-tear the toilet paper because even ripping is a form of work.

Bubbe thinks this is totally crazy. Neshama also thinks it nuts and has refused to leave the lights alone for ages. She even re-screws the light bulb in the fridge. Ima and Abba just ignore her.

I like not using electricity on *Shabbos*. It's not that I think flipping a switch is work, I just like the different feeling. The weekday rush isn't followed by weekend chaos, but by stillness and calm. No radio or TV, not even any cooking. Each restriction or change reminds me that it is good to rest. And at home we have light timers so it's not like we're stumbling around in the dark.

In the living room I hear Bubbe playing with the radio and then finally turning it off. She flicks off the lights and the sliver of yellow beneath my door vanishes. I turn over in bed and let the quiet of *Shabbos* fill the room.

Chapter 2

Lying in the weeds I feel dew soak through my T-shirt. Goose bumps form up my legs. I watch a small green frog tremble at the edge of the water. It croaks high and light, not soft like the peepers, or throaty like the bullfrog. I edge closer, slowly, shivering in the damp grass, legs tangled in wet skirt. The frog has shiny webbed feet, no definitive spots or stripes, probably *rama clamitans*. If I lie long enough, its tongue may dart out. I reach out, tentative, hesitating. It jumps away, scared by my approaching hands.

Linnaeus looked at nature, and where others saw chaos, he saw order. Clear lines, hierarchies of phylum, class, all the way down to individual species, God's creations in neat sets. Judaism is a lot like Taxonomy, even if Bubbie and Neshama think it's only oppression and patriarchy. It's also beauty and concision and order. There's a rule or law for just about everything, an order or right way to do things, from how to get married, to how to put on your shoes. Give me any week and I can tell you what Torah portion you're supposed to read, what lesson you learn.

Bubbie keeps asking me if I'm bored. I'm not, not for a moment. She shakes her head and wonders how many teenage girls want to spend all day alone or hang out with their grandmothers. I just tell her I'm busy. And I am. For the past two weeks I've prayed each morning in the trees behind the cottage. I mumble through the prayers quickly, my voice muffled by the branches. My voice sounds thin and lonely without the other girls from school or the *shul* congregation. I rush through without thinking about the words. After breakfast I practice swimming with Bubbie, splashing around, trying to keep water out of my nose and mouth. The rest of the time, I only wanted to sit and watch, and even more, to listen. I never knew nature was so noisy. The sun heats up, the dew evaporates and a chorus of mating frogs, squawking ducks,

wind-rattled leaves fill the air. Fish gurgle and make small splashes on the lake; the waves lap against the dock. The longer I sit, the more I hear.

I wade further into the snarled weeds, water creeping up my skirt and into my bathing suit when I crouch down. Thick mud squishes between my toes. The frog's eyes move, its cheeks pulsing. I cup my hands, anticipating the slimy webbed feet against my palms.

"Hey," a voice calls out across the water.

I startle, jerk upright. The frog hops into the weeds. A girl approaches in a canoe. I haven't seen anyone else up here except when we go for groceries in Northbrook.

The girl calls out across the water, "Hey, where's Craig?"

I stand up. My skirt sticks to my legs. "Who?" I shade my eyes, climb onto the dock. The girl paddles over. She has long blond hair twisted into two loose braids down her back and wears jean shorts. Her tank top reveals fair-skinned, freckled shoulders.

"Hi." I wipe mud off my hands onto my skirt.

"Is Craig here?" she asks, pulling up alongside the dock.

"Craig?"

"This is his cottage."

"Oh, my grandmother rented it this month--"

"Oh." She gazes across the bay.

"Um, is that your own canoe?" I admire the glossy red shell, the wood interior.

"Yeah," she says, distracted. "How long are you staying?"

I sit down at the end of the dock. "Until the end of August. I'm Ellie."

"Sarah." She tosses her hair, and looks me up and down. "What were you trying to do over there?"

"I was... well I saw this frog. I was trying to catch it."

"Catch a frog?"

"Yeah, I wanted to see what kind it was. I couldn't tell without picking it up."

She laughs, "You're kidding right?"

I don't say anything.

"Are you into science or something?"

I shrug. A pair of loons surface, their white necklaces distracting me. "I didn't know there were other people around," I say, staring past her at the birds.

"Yeah, down the bend," Sarah points over her shoulder.

I rinse my feet in the cool lake water. "So what do you and Craig do here?"

"Hang out. Fish." She twirls her paddle in her hands.

There's a pole I keep eyeing in the basement of the cottage, but Bubbie says she doesn't know how to use it. "I'd like to go fishing," I blurt. "There's a pole and all, but I don't know how..."

Sarah grabs hold the dock. "You just cast and reel in. I suppose I could show you."

I lean forward. "Really? That would be great."

Sarah looks up from her paddle, "Well, whenever." She reaches out to push away from the dock. "See you then."

"Wait." I stand up.

"What?"

"Well, if you have some time later, maybe you could..."

Sarah sighs, "I suppose we could go for a paddle now. I don't have my pole."

I smile. "I'll be back in a moment." I try to walk slowly up to the cottage for a lifejacket and paddle.

When I come back down to the water, Sarah is standing in the middle of the canoe floating a few feet from the dock. She looks at me and grins. "Watch this."

She leans over and balances her hands and then her feet on the gunnels. I watch, fascinated, as she puts her feet on the edges too and raises herself to a crouch. She's stripped off her tank top and jean shorts to reveal just three small patches of white spandex held together with

string. All the girls I know dress modestly; even their swimsuits are the kind Bubbie bought for me.

Sarah's breasts hang full and pendulous in the cups, her hips naked except for the little ties. She slowly stand up, quads flexing, arms out, eyes focused. When she is fully erect, she breaks into a smile and gives her hips a slight toss, rocking the boat. "Now watch."

As if I could take my eyes off. I squint into the sun and hold my breath, staring in amazement as she bends her knees and lifts her arms. She swings them down and hurls her body into the water beside the canoe. The canoe heaves wildly and flips over and Sarah lands with an impressive splash, and then surfaces, her hair slick against her skull.

"Neat, eh? I'm trying to do it without flipping the canoe."

I nod. She didn't even check the depth first.

"Wanna try?"

"Neh."

"Oh, come one, it's fun."

"Maybe later."

Sarah shrugs and dives toward the canoe.

I couldn't possibly imagine doing that. Besides not being a good swimmer, I have lousy balance. If I actually could screw up the courage to jump, I'd probably bump my head on the boat. And, I could never parade around wearing so little.

Sarah grabs hold of the canoe and kicks it back toward the shore. "So how old are you anyway?"

I zip up the lifejacket. "Fifteen."

She stands in the water and flips the canoe. Her nipples show through the white material of her bathing suit, pointy and brown. My stomach tightens into a knot. "I thought you were younger," she says.

Even though I'm already five-foot-eight, I still get mistaken for twelve. "How old are you?"

"Same." Sarah glances up at me. "Don't you want to change into shorts or a bathing suit or something?"

I shake my head and roll up my skirt at the waist a few times.

Sarah steadies the wobbling canoe as I step into the bow. "Keep your body low," she instructs. She expertly jumps in and pushes us away from the dock. I kneel like Sarah does, and plunge my paddle into the water, squishing my fingers against the side of the boat. I draw in my breath.

"Have you never been in a canoe before?"

"Ah, not really." I turn around and smile at her.

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, put one hand at the top of the paddle and the other lower down. Draw it through the water, like this."

I try again, splashing myself, still the boat edges forward.

We head away from the shore out into the bay towards Horseshoe Island. Seagulls bob in the protected water of the U. The wind picks up and the canoe rocks underneath me, small waves slapping against the sides. My arms tire and my back gets sore, but I keep paddling. When we get to the middle of the bay, Sarah leans back in the boat, and using her lifejacket as a pillow, tips her face up to the sun. I flip my legs around to face the centre of the canoe, watching the blue ripples all around. I imagine paddling along the shore and not coming back to the cottage. I know some lakes eventually lead to salt water, to throbbing jellyfish, purple and orange sea stars, rubbery sea cucumbers.

"You're not *that* bad for someone who has never been in a canoe," Sarah admits.

"Thanks."

Sarah undoes her braids, releasing her long, dark blond hair. The wind tosses it across her face, rippled strands catching on her bikini straps.

My own brown hair is always limp. Even when I blow dry it with my head upside down and comb furiously it's greasy and lifeless within twenty minutes. I drift my hand in the cool water and close my eyes. Her hair would be silky between my fingers. I flick open my eyes.

What am I thinking?

On the way back Sarah asks, "So, how come you've never been in a boat before?"

"I just never was. I'm from Toronto."

"Didn't you ever go to camp or a cottage?"

"Just day camp. In the city."

"Only swimming pools?"

"Sort of." I think of the girls' turn to go in the water, all those shrieking voices. "My sister's working at a camp."

"Yeah? How come you didn't go?"

"It's an all girls' camp," I tell her. That's not the real reason. I wanted to come here, to see the lake.

"Only girls? That would suck." She pushes her rippled hair out of her face and tucks it under her bikini strap.

We head toward the dock, the wind pushing us from behind. I don't splash once.

Sarah maneuvers us back up to the dock, grabs hold of the edge. "So I'll see you around."

I twist around in the canoe. "If you have some time, you know, maybe, you could show me how to cast."

"Yeah, maybe sometime." Sarah looks down at the boat.

I climb out of the canoe, my foot catching on the edge of my skirt. "Okay," I say after I untangle myself. "Bye then."

Sarah paddles away, her long hair blowing behind her. A shiver travels from my neck down through my body, exits out my knees.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

"I think I'll stay behind."

Bubbie shrugs and grabs her droopy straw hat.

I flop down in the hammock with my book about the sea and try to read about the lifecycle of a periwinkle. I keep glancing over the water.

It's been three days since Sarah came by. I try and read the nature guides and *Linnaeus: The Man and His Work*, but I can't concentrate. I've studied the frogs, identified trees, watched the sunfish from the dock, the cardinals, blue jays and hummingbirds from the hammock. I've gawked at the loons, the occasional merganser and blue heron. I've caught moths, swatted black flies, horseflies and mosquitoes. I've watched the squirrels try to raid the bird feeder, and even though I saw a deer in the trees, I'm bored.

"Do you wanna go check out the mini golf?" Bubbie asks when she gets back.

"Neh."

"What's with you?" Bubbie leans against the maple tree, gives the hammock a push.

"Nothing."

Bubbie smirks.

I sigh. "I was hoping that girl down the lake would take me fishing."

"So walk over there," Bubbie says, exasperated.

"I thought you could only go by boat."

Bubbie points to the trail leading off through the woods. "Just follow it past the campground and you'll come to their cottage. It's a huge A-frame with skylights - brand new - you can't miss it. More like a chalet than a cottage," Bubbie sniffs.

I head over in the afternoon, following the trail through the woods. I pass a swamp, a dumped car, the rusted metal frame slowly yielding to the elements, and then an area of low lying sumac bushes and then the forest opens up to a manicured stretch of lawn, an elegant house on a

hill. A new dock juts out over the water, a chaise lounge and glass table angled to catch the sun. Sliding glass doors and tall windows stretch across the front of the cottage revealing long fans turning in a row across the open front room.

A woman in a red bikini with long matching nails talks on a cordless phone on the porch. Small cups of material cover her full breasts, a thin strip of fabric snaking between her bum cheeks.

I tentatively climb the stairs.

"I *know* it's for safety," she says, "but I don't want rails on *my* balcony." She mouths "Sarah?" at me. I nod and she waves me inside the house.

"I don't *have* dogs or small children," she continues. "If I have to put rails up, I'm going to hire you to take them down the second the place is inspected."

The screen door slides smoothly open and then glides closed behind me. Sarah rocks back and forth in a recliner, bare legs tucked inside a baggy M.A.S.H. T-shirt, a blue baseball cap pulled low over her forehead.

She looks up, "I need to read one more page. Lady Eliza is just about to suck face with Sir Reginald." She holds up a Harlequin. The couple on the cover embrace wildly, the woman's breasts threatening to spill out of her low-cut dress, hair spilling through the man's hands.

Sarah's cottage is like a magazine picture. Sun slants down from the skylights across a wooden coffee table, richly upholstered chairs in deep red. Across from the chairs is a green leather couch. I perch on the armrest, look out over my shoulder at the lake. A hutch behind Sarah by the bedroom doors holds wine glasses and several bottles of wine.

Sarah puts down her book and stuffs a few peanuts in her mouth from a small glass bowl. "So?"

"I was hoping you might come by again."

"I've been pretty busy."

"Oh, with your mom?" I instantly regret the words.

Sarah giggles, "Yeah right, with my mom. We read trash together."

I tap my sandal on the pine floors. "I thought maybe we'd go fishing, or something."

"Like play with frogs?" she teases.

An angry blush climbs over my cheeks. "Just forget it," I mumble. I smooth my skirt over my legs and head for the door.

"Wait."

I turn around. "What?"

"You don't need to leave yet. I could show you my stripper routine."

"Your what?" I stop by the door.

Sarah takes off her cap, her hair falling over her shoulders.

"Let me show you." Sarah stands up and struts across the room, hips swinging, her mouth slightly open in a sexy pout. She stops in front of me and gyrates her hips down to the floor, bending her knees open wide. She twists her T-shirt up at the waist to expose her taut belly, her head tipping back to bare her white neck.

I freeze by the door, bug-eyed.

"Wanna try?"

I back against the wall. My body doesn't move that way. "I couldn't-"

Sarah eyes my baggy skirt. "How about just the walk?"

Sarah struts, one leg in front of the other, swinging a hip to the side. "And a one and two and turn." She swivels on the ball of her foot, hair fanning out. "Now you try."

"I can't." I clutch my blushing cheeks.

"Well, have you ever tried this?" Sarah grabs an empty plastic tumbler off the coffee table. "Watch," she instructs. She holds the glass in both hands and slowly draws her tongue up the glass, flicking it over the rim. "That's called the butterfly flick. I read about it in my mom's *Cosmo*. Five Tips To A Better Blow Job, July."

I stare, my mouth open, twist my hands behind my back.

"It's better on a beer bottle of course." Sarah holds out the glass.

I shake my head, eyes wide. Sarah shrugs and then closes her eyes, leans her head back, and starts at the base of the glass again. She gives a fake groan and then collapses back in the chair giggling.

Her T-shirt slips off her freckled shoulder. I stare at the curve of the top of her breasts.

Sarah holds out the glass. "It's a good skill to have."

I shudder, "No, that's okay." Sarah watches me, rolling the glass in her palms. I tug nervously at my fingers, cracking my knuckles. "My parents don't really read magazines," I tell her. "My dad, he's into *Talmud*, that's Jewish law. He's in this club called the *Daf Yomi*, which means he reads a whole page of *Talmud* every day." Shut up Ellie. "They'll be finished after the year 2000 and then there's this huge party in New York." I'm talking too fast and Sarah is staring at me, a bemused expression on her face. She swivels her tongue around the rim.

"I think I'd like to be a stripper when I grow up, so it's important to know how to do these things," she explains.

"You mean take your clothes off in public?" I bunch my skirt in my hands.

"Yeah, and get paid for it too. How *easy*. I'll either do that or be a lawyer like my mom."

"Those are pretty different."

"Yeah, I think I'd rather be a stripper." Sarah sits next to me, tucking her feet underneath her. She holds out the glass. "Guys love this."

I swallow, "Have you done it?"

Sarah winks and giggles. "Not yet. I like to keep in shape though, just in case." She leans closer to me. "I dare you. I double dog dare you." Her eyes flash.

"I should get going," I say, standing up. "My grandmother is probably waiting for me to eat lunch. We'll be having this soup, borscht. It's made from beets."

Sarah sighs, stand up and flops back in the easy chair. She swivels side to side, pushing off the coffee table with her feet. "Fine. Go home."

"Okay, so maybe I'll see you later."

"Whatever."

She picks up the Harlequin and runs her fingers absently through her long loose hair.

I stare at her exposed shoulder, the green T-shirt setting off the curved muscle. My stomach contracts into a tight ball.

"I'll do it." I grab a thick goblet from the wine rack on the hutch by the bedroom doors and draw my tongue up the stem, flick it over the rim. A layer of dust coats my tongue. I bang the wine glass back on the hutch. "See you later."

I catch a glimpse of Sarah's surprised face as I run down the porch steps.

I run along the path back to our cottage and head straight to the dock. I strip off my khaki skirt and peach T-shirt and jump into the water wearing my new bathing suit. Water shoots up my nose, but I swim all the way to the raft, arms flailing, gasping as I grab the ladder. Bubbie waves wildly and claps from the porch. "Good for you, I knew you could do it," she hollers. I wave back weakly.

I practice diving off the raft over and over, hurtling myself into the water until I can stand and swing my arms over my head, propel myself, like a dolphin leaping.

The next morning I lie in the hammock watching a squirrel scamper up the maple tree. It runs down a branch and then leaps onto the top of bird feeder. Chickadees and cardinals flutter away. The squirrel's claws scrape furiously on the green plastic and then slide over the edge to the ground, and the feeder swings wildly. I turn over in the hammock and the squirrel darts away.

I hear splashing down at the dock. I roll over and prop up my head. Sarah hauls a fishing rod and tackle out of her canoe. I pretend not to see her.

She wears a tank top over a black bathing suit, her hair in a tight ponytail at the base of her neck. Long strands drift around her head when she walks toward me.

"Hi," she says.

I don't move. "Hi."

Sarah puts down the tackle box, props the rod against a tree. "I thought we'd go fishing."

"No thanks."

"Oh come on." Sarah leans one hip against the rope of the hammock making it swing.

I take a big breath. "I thought you'd have better things to do." Like strip.

Sarah doesn't say anything for a moment. She slaps a mosquito away from her shoulder.

Finally she says, "My mom's boyfriend just came."

"So?"

Sarah shrugs, "He's gross."

I flip back over. "How?"

"He's creepy and annoying."

"Really?" I flip my legs sideways in the hammock to face Sarah. "How long is he staying?"

She sighs and leans against the maple tree. "Until we leave, or hopefully only until his fax situation becomes urgent. Then he'll have to drive at least to Kingston."

"Why don't you like him?"

"He's greasy and way younger than my mom. He'll be gone in a month or so and then there'll be some other sleazy guy. Anyway, I brought you some clothes." Sarah pulls a pair of jean shorts and a tank top out of a plastic shopping bag. "Here, you can have these."

I get out of the hammock and hold up the clothes. "What for?"

"To wear, stupid." She punches me on the arm. "They're too small for me."

"Are you sure?"

Sarah cracks her gum. "I can't get the waist done up anymore."

I hesitate, looking at the clothes. I have always wanted to wear shorts in the summer, instead of my baggy skirt, but I can't imagine my naked thighs or bare shoulders.

"Are you sure you don't need these anymore?"

Sarah nods. "Are you changing or what?"

I stare at Sarah's enormous blue green eyes. She returns my gaze without flinching.

Sarah follows me up to the cottage. I scoot into the bedroom to change, try to get the door closed before she comes in, but she plunks herself down on the patchwork bedspread. She picks *Linnaeus* off the night table. I wedge myself beside the only piece of furniture, the pine chest with the cranberry glass lamp and pull on the shorts before taking off my skirt. The shorts, denim cutoffs, rest loosely on my hips. I stare down at my slightly hairy, bare pale legs.

"Aren't you going to put on the top?" she asks.

I look at it laid out on the bed. "I... I might burn."

"Sunblock."

"I haven't shaved."

"Who cares, it's a cottage."

I turn around, take a breath, yank off my T-shirt and pull on the tank top. Ellie, you could have just said, I don't wear tank tops.

"There, that's better." Sarah says, popping a bubble. "You can't fish in a skirt. Well you can, but it's weird."

The tank top is thick white cotton. It's plain, fitted, a little faded. I feel naked.

"What does your necklace say?" Sarah comes up close to me. I can smell the peppermint of her gum, the soapy smell of shampoo.

I swallow, "Oh, it's Hebrew."

Sarah lifts the Star of David off my skin, peers at it closely. "What does the writing mean?"

"It says Zion, love for Israel."

Sarah drops the charm. Her fingers graze my collar bone, my skin tingling.

"I wish I had long legs like yours," she says.

"Too skinny." I say, tucking one leg behind the other.

Sarah is tall, yet not lanky like me. She has muscular legs. Saturday morning soccer, I bet.

Down on the dock Sarah shows me how to hold the rod. I want to cast from the canoe. Sarah laughs, "Practice on land first, or we'll tip." She scratches a mosquito bite on her leg. "How come you don't know how to cast?"

"I told you, I've never been to a cottage before." I practice releasing and reeling in the line.

"Well, what *do* you know?"

I cast my line, the hook forming a huge arc before sinking out in the bay. "That was beautiful, wasn't it," I say over my shoulder.

Sarah nods, "It was." She sits on the dock, dangles her feet in the water.

"I know all about the sea, except I haven't been yet." I reel in the line, place the rod over my shoulder and flick it over my head, releasing the catch. The hook whizzes out into the water.

"I went to Niagara Falls last summer, to Seaworld. I held a starfish in my hand."

Sarah stares at me. I hold my gaze steady. "The starfish was wet and brittle and I could see hundreds of its tiny feelers moving, feel them clinging to my skin." The whole time I'm rambling, I can't take my eyes off Sarah's hip, the jut of her bone above the waist of her shorts. "The sea star clung to my skin," I repeat.

"You are *so* weird."

I feel myself blush from my chin to just below my eyes.

"I also know all about Houdini from my sister. Did you know he could even escape the Russian police? He jumped off the Detroit Bridge in a water can and escaped. He could hold his breath forever."

Sarah stands up. "You're getting weirder." She flashes me a smile. "Is your whole family like this?"

"Don't even ask."

When I get back Bubbie is drinking a gin and tonic on the porch.

"Sarah asked me to stay for dinner."

Bubbie eyes my outfit. "So? You didn't want to stay?"

"I didn't know what they'd serve."

Bubbie laughs, squeezes my arm. "You could just tell them you're kosher, or vegetarian."

"I told them you were expecting me." I grab a chip from the plastic bowl.

Bubbie nods and I help her bring out food to the picnic table, smoked meat sandwiches and potato salad made with vinegar dressing, the way I like it.

After dinner we sit down on the dock slapping at mosquitoes. Bubbie slides into an Adirondack chair and lights a cigarette.

"I thought you quit."

"I occasionally like to shove one more nail in my coffin."

"What happened to the Popsicle sticks?"

"I cheat every once in awhile." Bubbie looks at my legs. "Did Sarah give you the shorts?"

I nod.

She flicks cigarette ash into the water. "And what would your parents think?"

I cross my legs, tucking my feet underneath me. "You won't tell them, will you?"

"Of course not, not if you don't want me to. I think they look nice on you. Can you imagine your father's face if he saw?" Bubbie laughs.

"Should I, should I not wear them?"

"Oh Ellie, wear whatever the hell you want. Your parents feel all funny about legs, and now even I'm acting crazy."

I sigh and lean back in the chair, let my arms dangle over the armrests. "There's no men here to see me, no people really, so I don't think it really matters. I won't wear them when we go into Northbrook or anything."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, I don't care."

"You know I haven't seen your mother's legs since 1976."

I glance at Bubbie, "1976?"

"Yep," she says. We both start giggling.

"I don't even know what they look like," I say.

"Oh they're very nice. Your mother was athletic once. She has good calf muscles from skiing."

"I can't imagine Ima on skis."

"She just flew along. Didn't like moguls. She liked the feeling of flying. I guess she flies in a different way now." Bubbie shrugs.

"I'd like to fly like that, over snow and down hills."

"I've never taken you or Neshama away because of *Shabbos*."

I nod.

The sun slides behind the island and mosquitoes start buzzing around my head.

"What day is it?" I ask.

Bubbie closes one eye. "Saturday, I think."

"We missed *Shabbos*!" I sit upright, grip the arms of the chair.

Bubbie stretches her arms over her head, yawns. "I guess we did. I feel well rested, don't you?"

"Bubbie, we didn't light candles!"

"We could do them now. "

"It's a day late."

"Oh, c'mon, just pretend."

I shake my head. "It's not the same."

I wander up to the cottage. If I were at home we'd be singing *zemirot* around the dinner table. Ima and Abba are probably celebrating in Jerusalem right now. I scuff my sandal on the wood floor and sink into one of the orange recliners and rotate back and forth until I'm sleepy.

The next morning after prayers, breakfast and swimming I settle in the hammock. A light breeze blows across the bay. I prop my ocean encyclopedia open on my chest and let my eyes close. When Sarah leaned toward me licking the glass, I saw the deep cleft between her breasts. I imagine my hand reaching out to her shoulder, stroking her collarbone and then down over her chest. A delicious tingle runs through me. My eyes fly open, what the *hell* am I thinking?

I flip to a picture of the narwhale.

Boys, Ellie, you're supposed to like boys. Right. Like... I don't know any boys. They go to a different school, sit in a different part of the synagogue, look away when we walk by. There's that guy at the supermarket Neshama thinks is cute. He has nice eyes and his hair is the same strawberry blond as Sarah's, except hers is long and rippled and soft, and oh, the ripples fall over her breasts.

Omigod, I lie stunned, my heart thumping. I shake my hands and pull at my hair. I'm thinking about a girl, and she's not even Jewish.

I can't be. I'm class monitor. I go to science fair. I'm the kind of girl who doesn't think about boys.

Who never thinks about boys.

I won't be in love with her, I just won't. I'll just stop right now. There, done.

I get out of the hammock and march up the gravel road into the trees. I just want to be like her. That's right, the breasts, the hair and the way she talks, confident like Neshama, snappy like Bubbie, able to leap from canoes and gyrate in bikinis. I lean against an ash tree, dizzy. Omigod, *has va halila*, please not this. I just want to be normal.

Please, please, please.

Everyone I know is a pair, male and female. Adam and Eve, Avram and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Okay, they're a threesome, but Isaac is key. Romeo and Julie, Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh.

There's supposed to be some nice David or Issac in my future, medium height, maybe even muscled and tall as well as hairy. Yes, I'll be Ellie Cohen, or Ellie Rabinowitz, wife of some Jacob or Daniel. I close my eyes and try to imagine myself next to him. Holding hands, ok, kissing not bad. But not like Sarah. I sit on the ground and lean against the tree.

I can just see it. I'll be walking down the aisle in Ima's wedding dress with the lace sleeves. Abba and Ima look so proud, Neshama is my beautiful bridesmaid and there'll be Sarah smiling at me under the *chupah* wearing her jean shorts, a white bikini top, her veil flowing over her gorgeous hair. I'm heading towards her, propelled by this crazy swelling in my heart, this feeling like I might burst. My legs are like jelly and I'm almost at the end of the aisle. I'm so close I can almost hold her hand and then just a few more minutes and I'll get to kiss her. And then suddenly I see Ima, Abba and Neshama staring at me.

Ima gasps and falls into hysterics.

Neshama shrieks, "That's *so* disgusting, Ellie. You want to do IT with a girl?"

"A *shonda*," Abba booms, "my Ellie with a *shiksa*!" He spits, "Feh feh feh."

Only Bubbie is happy. "Serves your crazy parents right." She laughs, her mouth getting bigger and bigger until it turns into a black hole swallowing up the guests, even Sarah disappearing into the vortex.

When I try to go home, Neshama stops me. "Don't you know? They're sitting *shivah* for you. Do you know how much baking I had to do for *your* mourners?"

Lightning will leap down from the heavens, rivers will flood, tornadoes will spin, locusts, hail, fire, the first born children will suddenly perish which means Abba, Ima and Neshama will all die slow and agonizing deaths.

"No!" I leap up. Then I drop down on the ground, nervous energy ratcheting through me, and do five measly pushups before I'm panting.

I find Bubbie down on the dock. "Mini golf, let's play mini golf."

She looks up from her book. "Now? Isn't Sarah coming over soon?"

"Yes, let's go now."

"Do you want to see if Sarah wants to come?"

"No! I mean, let's just go."

"Did you two have a fight or something?"

"No. I just thought we could do something the two of us. Mini golf and ice cream."

"Okay, okay, let me just get changed."

I get Bubbie's keys and hat for her while she puts on shorts and a T-shirt, freshens her lipstick.

"Hurry."

"What's with you? It's not going to close or disappear."

I only relax once we pull onto the highway.

Mini golf turns out to be even stupider than I expected, a little ball in a little hole, with silly obstacles. An ornamental plastic farmer and his wife swing over the final obstacle. One more happy pair.

Sarah comes over in the evening. I'm sitting on the dock with my prayer book, trying to do the evening prayers I haven't done since I got to the cottage.

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"Mini golf."

"I thought you hate ball sports."

"I do. Mini golf isn't a sport."

"Well do you want to go for a paddle now?"

I glance over at her freckled shoulder, her deep blue eyes. Say no. Say you don't feel well. "Um sure."

I go up to the cottage to get my lifejacket. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

When I come back down Sarah is standing on the dock, the fading sun lighting up her hair like fire. Run away, just run away and leave. I slowly make my way towards her, but instead of getting in the canoe I dive into the lake, the cool water stopping the sick feeling charging through me.

Chapter 3

The sun scorches down on my prostrate body. Sarah rolls over on the dock next to me, her hair tickling my shoulder. "How long are you staying?" I ask.

"We're supposed to leave next week. You?"

"The week after next."

Only one more week to try and walk like Sarah, match her snappy answers. Only one more week to stare at her breasts when I think she isn't looking. And only one more week to hate myself for doing it.

For the past two weeks I've spent the mornings alone. I never go over to Sarah's, just wait until she saunters over, which is usually every afternoon. We paddle around the bay and into the marsh. If it rains we play monopoly or cards with Bubbie. Now the mornings are already cooler and the adult loons have left their babies behind.

Sarah lies on her back. I brush her hair away from my shoulder. I pause, my hand hesitating. Just one curl, and then I'll stop. Don't Ellie, don't.

I reach out and finger the wet blond end. She doesn't notice.

"Want me to brush your hair?" I ask.

"It'll frizz," she says, her voice sleepy.

"You can jump in the water again."

Sarah yawns, then nods. "Just don't pull too hard." She sits up and slips on sunglasses. I comb the tangles out from the ends of her spun taffy hair. She leans back against my upright knees, her skin warm on mine. When I get the knots out, I draw the brush over her head, rippled hair spilling over my legs. Sarah drops her head all the way back, mouth relaxed, hands loose by her sides. She breathes long and slow, eyes closed.

I rub a long curl against my cheek. Heat runs from my toes up my legs. Then slowly, I comb my fingers over her scalp, down over her shoulders.

Sarah shivers and lets out a small "Ahhh."

I pause a moment, hesitating, and then trail my hand lightly down her arm.

Sarah sighs again and then jerks away. "*What* are you doing?"

I'm still holding her hair. "I just thought..." The heat in my legs lodges in my stomach.

We stare at each other for a long moment. I bite my lip, my heart thumping.

"I think I'll go up for lunch." She stands up.

"Oh," I whisper.

She grabs her beach towel and T-shirt and backs away from me.

I exhale a breath I didn't know I was holding, my arms limp in my lap. Leaning back on the dock, I close my eyes. Her scalp was warm in my hands.

She liked it, I know she did.

Sarah calls from the porch, "Do you want some lunch?"

I look up and shade my eyes. I can't imagine what I'll eat there, but I don't want to go home either. I slowly make my way up to the cottage, sun-dazed and humming with the feel of Sarah's hair.

The kitchen in Sarah's cottage shines high-tech black and silver. The counters are granite, cabinets frosted glass, the fridge glossy stainless steel.

We are both quiet, not really looking at each other. "Are you sure you don't want a sandwich?" Sarah asks. She rummages in the refrigerator.

"Nah, I don't think so." Sarah has ham and cheese out.

"Lemonade?"

"Sure." I sit on a stool on the opposite side of the counter from Sarah, watch the curve of her bum in her black bathing suit as she pours juice into a plastic glass. Her hair hangs loose down her back.

The phone rings, making both of us jump. Sarah grabs the cordless off the wall. "Hello? Oh, hi." She slumps over her plate. "Ok, I guess. Fine... yeah... nothing..." She studies her hair for split ends, leans against the counter. "No Craig's not here... No, no one. It's totally boring... Yeah, yeah... talk to you later... No she doesn't want to... bye."

"Was that a friend?"

"Richard." Sarah peels an onion.

"Who?"

"My father." She doesn't look up.

"Oh, does he ever come up here?"

"No, he's a dick." Sarah slices the onion, her lips pressed together.

"Why's he a dick?"

"He just is." Sarah pulls a jar of mustard out of the refrigerator.

"Do you ever see him?"

"Do you ever stop asking questions?" Sarah puts down the mustard.

"Just curious." My hands twist behind my back. "So, do you?"

Sarah glares at me, then sighs. "You really want to know? He shows up for my birthday, takes Maureen -that's my mom- and me somewhere expensive for dinner and we all pretend to like each other. He gives me cool presents," she holds out her leg to show off a gold ankle bracelet below her muscled calf, "and Maureen and Richard try not to bag on each other's current lovers. Any more questions?"

"Lovers?" The word pops out of my mouth.

"Yeah," Sarah leers. "Looo-vers." She leans over the counter to where I am sitting, her breasts pressing against her bathing suit.

Sarah snickers and taps her fingers on the counter. "Why is that so embarrassing to you?" She slowly licks the mustard off the tip of the knife. I blush even more, sip my lemonade.

Sarah's mom pops out of a bedroom and joins us in the kitchen. "Hi, it's Ellie, right?"

She daubs sunscreen on her tanned shoulders.

Sarah steps away from me, and spreads mustard on slices of white bread.

"Yes, hi." I slip off the stool and take a few steps toward the long oak kitchen table, out of the way.

"Maureen, we're out of milk again." Sarah dumps the empty carton in the trash.

"Put it on the list." Sarah's mom wears hot pink spandex shorts, her large breasts hoisted, flattened and pushed together under a black running bra. Her streaked blond ponytail pokes over her sun visor. "I can't wait for you to start driving."

"I'm not gonna be your servant," Sarah mumbles, scribbling a list on a pad of paper.

"We're also out of gingerale, marshmallows and Swiss."

"Gin too." Sarah's mom bends to tie her shoe.

Sarah peers over the counter. "*More gin?*"

"Sarah," her tone hardens into a warning.

"What?" Sarah's slanted blue green eyes open wide.

Maureen straightens up and frowns at her. "What are you girls going to do this afternoon?"

"Well," Sarah leans on the counter, "I thought we'd start with vodka shots, and then move on to mixed drinks, down on the dock of course."

"That's not funny."

"Why not, Mother?"

I step further back into the living room, pretend to read the newspaper on the green couch.

Sarah's mom stands staring at her, legs spread, hands on hips. Sarah takes a bite of her sandwich, staring back. A moment pauses and I sink lower on the couch.

Dave, Sarah's mom's boyfriend, pulls open the sliding door. "Are you ready?" He wears a baseball cap and tank top, chest hair curling over the neckline.

He puts his arm around her shoulder, his lips close to her ear. "Are you ready?"

Sarah flips her hair over her shoulder and turns away.

Maureen nods and lets Dave guide her out.

"You shouldn't let her get to you," I hear him say from the porch.

"You shouldn't let her get to you," Sarah mimics. She drinks directly from a two litre bottle of cola and then shoves the refrigerator closed.

Sarah stomps around the kitchen opening and closing drawers, picking at her sandwich and a bag of salt and vinegar chips. She disappears into a bedroom and comes out wearing sunglasses, a pair of jean shorts over her bathing suit, her feet slipped into green flip flops. "I'm going to get some ice cream at the campground. Are you coming?"

We head up the shaded gravel road through the trees to the highway. Dry heat breaks over us, the asphalt magnifying the sun's glare. The buzz of black flies and the hum of hydro wires fills the air with a constant electric drone, like heat making noise, only the roar of passing cars breaking the monotony. Beyond the ribbon of gravel at the shoulder Black Eyed Susans and Queen Anne's Lace bloom. The road stretches ahead of us, a shimmering black curve. Sarah walks ahead, her hands clenched at her sides, her flip flops sucking at her heels. A snake flits out of the ditch surprising me. I step back and crouch at the side of the road, watch it blend in green and brown among the scrub.

"Did you see the snake?" I call to her.

Sarah whirls around. "Why would I care?"

Sarah doesn't say anything until she has an ice cream cone and a small brown paper bag full of jelly worms, gummy bears and jujubes. We sit at a picnic table under the shade of some elm trees by the water. Off to the side is a grassy area for families and swimming, and then the

boat launch smelling of gasoline. I pull down my baseball hat to shade my eyes from the noon heat and suck on a Popsicle.

The water laps blue and gold from the sun's rays against the weathered boards of the boat dock, weeds gently moving back and forth in the water. Out in the bay beyond the point, seagulls circle the few lone white pines on Horseshoe Island. They dip around the tall branches, screeching and garbling, and then finally come to rest in the placid waters of its U, bobbing on mild waves. The sky stretches blue, high white clouds thin and far away.

"Jujube?" Sarah offers the bag to me.

I shake my head.

"Your parents still together?" Sarah asks.

I nod.

"Money?"

"Pardon?"

"Are your parents together for financial reasons or because they just can't be bothered to split up?"

My parents would never hold hands in public, or even in front of me, yet I see the way they listen to each other. "I, I think they like each other."

"Really?" Sarah looks me right in the eye, looks at me so hard I twist in my seat.

"Yeah," I respond. "They went to Israel together for the summer."

Sarah whistles and shakes her head.

"Can I ask you one more question?"

Sarah pushes her sunglasses down her nose and narrows her eyes at me, her lip curling.

"Only one?"

I ignore the teasing slant of her eyes. "Why do you call your mother Maureen?"

Sarah stops smiling and looks out at the kids playing in the sandpit. She turns back to me, "Cause then she listens."

When I get back to the cottage, I join Bubbie for lunch.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Did you ever do anything really bad? I mean when you were a kid."

"No, but your mom did."

"Really?" I put down my tomato sandwich.

Bubbie laughs, "I'm just kidding. Your mother never did anything. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, nothing."

Bubbie looks at me over her glass. "What, is it pork? Did you forget *Shabbos* again? Gelatin?"

"Forget it."

"Aw, I'm sorry, I'll stop. Let's see. I think I stole a magazine from a store and, well of course I was never home on time, and I smoked. Nothing I think I'll go to hell for."

I sigh and down the rest of my lemonade.

Sarah doesn't come over the next day so I wander over to her place in the evening. She sits at the top of the porch stairs, her hair scraped into two tight braids.

"Hey," she says.

I sit tentatively next to her. "I brought my star chart," I say, pulling out a paperback book.

"Wha?"

"My star chart. I'm going to find the Little Dipper and then maybe some--"

Sarah bursts out laughing.

"What?"

"You are *such* a geek."

I shrug and flip open the book. As long as she's laughing. "I can never find Cassiopeia."

I lean back on my elbows, gaze up at the sky.

Sarah wraps her arms around her legs, taps her feet on the wooden deck. "Stars are boring. How about Truth or Dare?"

"You know I'm really bad at it." A slice of moon sinks through the clear night sky behind the trees on the island.

"Truth or dare?" Sarah repeats.

"Truth," I say, still looking at the sky.

"Really? You never choose truth."

"I do tonight." I glance at my chart, "I think that's the Little Dipper."

Sarah sighs. "Okay, truth. Ever kissed a boy?"

"Did you know the moon controls the tides?"

"Ellie."

I sit up. "No, but I've practiced for it."

Sarah glances over. "Pillows?"

"No, on my sister." I check the star map and then squint back up at the sky, avoiding Sarah's look. "If that's the Little Dipper then..."

Sarah's eyes open wide. "You're kidding, right?"

I shake my head.

"Ew. I always used my pillow or arm."

"It's not the same." My sister and I used to practice kissing with our mouths clamped tight when we were little.

Sarah pauses, impressed, looking at me, head cocked to the side. "Okay, you dare me something."

I'd like to dare her to kiss me, to let me touch her long strawberry blond rippled hair. I stare out over the lake shimmering in the moonlight.

"You're so slow!" Sarah stands up. I cringe, bite my lip. "Okay, I'll choose truth instead, and I'll answer the question I gave you. Yes, I've kissed a boy. There. Now, how about a dare-"

"Wait, what was it like?"

"The kiss? Wet."

"Did you, did you use your tongue?"

"Of course."

"So, is he your boyfriend now?"

"Neh."

"Why not?"

"I didn't like him that much."

"You still kissed him?"

Sarah tosses her head. "Enough questions, truth or dare?"

"Dare."

"Okay, I double dog dare you to skinny dip to the raft and back." She stands over me, hands on her hips.

I look up. "Skinny dip?"

Sarah flicks a braid over her shoulder, nods.

I pause, imagining the cool water on my skin. "Will you come?"

"You mean you dare me back?"

I shiver and nod. A breeze stirs the trees, bits of my hair brushing against my shoulder. I clutch the star chart to my chest, my stomach forming a sharp fist, like fingernails pressing into me.

She jumps up. "Last one in is a rotten egg."

We sprint across the lawn, pulling off our T-shirts and bras, laughing as we run through the dark. I stop at the end of the grass to wriggle out of my shorts and underwear, taking a quick

glimpse of Sarah's breasts. The sky is dark except for the moon casting pools over the lake. The night extends black like velvet, the stars glimmering like sequins. I run straight across the dock, my legs still churning as I hit the water. A delicious cold shock breaks the nervous energy circulating through me. Just as I surface, Sarah dives, ever graceful, her naked body white in the night. She swims a furious smooth line past me towards the raft. I do my best front crawl behind her, my arms choppy, legs splashing.

When we grasp the ladder, I can feel Sarah's warmth beside me, hear the rapidness of her breath, see the tops of her round breasts. Our legs brush each other as we tread water. My nipples harden into tight buds in the cold water.

"Ellie?"

"Yeah?"

"It's your turn."

"I dared you back."

She flicks water in my face. "Doesn't count."

"Ah." I pause. "I . . . I can't think of anything."

Sarah spits a mouthful of water at me. "You're pathetic."

"Dare me something instead," I beg.

Sarah pauses, moves closer to me. "Hmm..." she furrows her brow. Then she leans over to my ear. My teeth start to chatter, goose bumps forming up my arms.

"I dare you," she whispers, her breath warm, "to disappear."

"What?" I jerk away.

"You know, leave and not come back." Sarah smiles.

"Where would I go?"

"I don't know, just away."

I push hair out of my face. "That's the stupidest thing ever. It'd take hours to just walk to Cloyne."

"Who said walk?" Sarah calmly treads water.

"You mean hitch? Isn't that dangerous?"

"I've done it before. Do you dare me back?"

"No."

"Dare me back."

"Forget it."

"C'mon."

"No! I wanna dare you something else," I blurt.

The screen door slams up at the cottage and we hear Sarah's mom on the porch.

"I want-" I whisper.

"I'm cold," Sarah interrupts. "Race you back." She plunges down into the water, leaving me hanging on the raft. The moon sinks behind the island and then the porch lights flick off.

I let go, water closing over my head. My hair swims around me in a brown cloud.

I creep out of the water and dress shivering behind a tree. Sarah is waiting for me with a flashlight from the cottage. Her hair leaves a long wet patch down her back. She walks me back through the trees, waving her flashlight across the path. When she bends down to tie her shoe I slip into the trees, a moment of rustling branches, and then I'm motionless behind a birch. I press my back against the peeling bark.

"Ellie?" Sarah shines the light into the trees.

She flashes the light on me, and steps into the trees. I dart back, crouching in the grass.

"Ellie?"

"I'm right here."

She whirls around, shines the light in my eyes. "*What* are you doing?"

"Disappearing."

Her lip curls into a sneer.

"And re-appearing," I add. "You dared me."

Sarah scowls. "You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

Sarah turns on her heel and runs back to her cottage, a haze of mosquitoes after her.

When I stumble out of the trees, most of the cottage lights are already out. Bubbie has gone to bed, her radio playing fifties' music. I wander about, skim a layer of dust off a pine end table, drag my fingers around the brass lamp and the picture frames. In the bedroom I slip off my Star of David necklace and put it in my bag with my skirts.

I oversleep the next morning, wake up sweat-streaked and disoriented. My stomach feels queasy and a nervous energy tingles in my feet. I stomp them on the bare wood floor.

Grey clouds blanket the horizon, the air heavy, moisture hanging like a layer of city smog. Bubbie is out on the dock. "*Summertime, and the living is easy,*" she bellows, her voice rough. I wave to her and head back into the woods with my prayer book. Perspiration forms under my arms and along my hairline. Between the sparse branches of two fir trees, I step off the path, brush away loose branches and twigs until I have a small clearing. My morning prayers fall automatically, without thought, off my tongue. I chant under my breath, *Mo Dai Ani Lefanecha*, flipping through the pages. When I finish the humidity still wraps thickly around me, through me. I add a few extra English prayers of my own. *Please stop me from doing anything bad.* I crouch down in the pine needles, pick up a dry birch branch and balance it against another bough, creating an arch as high as my waist. I step back to eye the curve of wood between the firs, and add more branches, forming a small dome. Inside my tree hut I sit cross-legged and try to recite psalms. I sigh and drop my head forward. Sarah's skin shimmered warm and wet and close.

Back down at the shore, I watch a frog tremble in the weeds, its cheeks quivering. I bend down in the mud, cup my hands, and reach out and snap my palms around the frog. It's smooth, not slimy the way I expected. The tiny feet tickle and I let it go.

Sarah stands on the end of her dock skipping stones over the calm grey lake. The rocks make small plinking noises across the still water. When I join her she slumps in a wooden deck chair and scratches a trio of mosquito bites up her arm.

I sit next to her and pull my knees into my chest under my baggy T-shirt. Two loons swim out by the island, diving down and resurfacing.

"I built this hut, this tree hut."

"A tree hut?"

"Yeah, wanna see it?"

Sarah turns and watches the loons takeoff and fly over the trees. "No, not really."

The screen door slides open and we turn to see Dave coming down the stairs with a beer and newspaper. "Crap," she says, "he's coming this way." We wave at Dave and head to the path through the trees. "Okay," she says, "what did you want to show me?"

I lead her up behind the cottage, half way up the road to the highway and then along the old overgrown path. She eyes me suspiciously, when I lift a branch for her to go into the hut. We balance on our toes in the small dark space under the branches. Our knees bump and I bury my hands in the dry pine needles to balance myself. A cool breeze lifts some of the humidity.

"It's quiet here," Sarah says.

I nod, squint in the dim light. My legs start to cramp. "It's better if you sit I think." We shift our feet in the small space, trying to put our butts down without disturbing the branches. Sarah is first to lose her balance. She grabs my hand, sending small currents down my spine, her other hand grazing my thigh. We fall over holding tight to each other, sticks tumbling down on us. I want to laugh and cry, but I'm breathing too hard. I'm holding Sarah and she's laughing, a quick layer of sweat forming between the skin of our legs.

"I'm sorry Ellie," she says, her mouth open with laughter. "Oh Ellie," she says, "I'm sorry." She can't stop laughing.

We stumble out of the trees into a clearing, surrounded by sumac bushes, the grass flat like a cushion from where deer have lain. Sarah flops down on her back still giggling. I pick a milkweed pod and lie down next to her.

"Look." I break open the green shell to show her the layers of white feather-like plant inside. "It's like a female peacock."

Sarah touches the pod, sap dripping.

"Monarch butterflies feed on them."

"A-huh." Sarah rolls over on her side. "Last night in the water..."

My shoulders tense, a film of sweat covering my back. "Yeah?"

"I know what you wanted to dare me."

I freeze, my chest tightening. I stare at her. She doesn't have her usual teasing look, the manipulative gleam in her eyes. She touches my bare arm, milkweed sticky on my skin. Raising herself on one elbow, she hesitates, moves her lips close to my ear. "I dare, you to kiss me," she whispers. "I want to know what it's like, to kiss a girl."

The earth seems to tilt, my pulse racing. I roll over on my side and stare at her. She presses her mouth against mine, her lips stiff at first and then soft and warm. My arm slides tentatively over her waist, down the curve of her hip. Sarah holds her breath, her eyes closed. She doesn't stop me.

I wake up early, shivering under a thin blanket, dawn barely etching the grey sky. Bubbie and I drink tea bundled in sweaters on the porch and watch the baby loons. She passes me the binoculars. I can't focus. I drum my fingers on the edge of my chair, keep checking my watch.

When it is finally late enough, so I won't seem too eager, I run to Sarah's. My feet are light and quick through the trees, past the leaning birch, over the spruce log, past the marsh with the rusting truck. I force myself to slow down at the sumac trees at the edge of Sarah's lawn and

stop at the porch stairs. The blinds are drawn, the doors shut, the patio furniture put away. My heart thumps. Down on the water a whippoorwill calls "weeee-heeee." I walk around to the front of the cottage. Sarah's mom's jeep is gone. Maybe they just went for groceries or mini golf. Peering in the front door of the cottage, I see the magazines are neatly stacked, the fans still, the counters clean.

I pace up and down the porch, kick a pile of pinecones onto the grass. I sit on the porch, my head buried in my lap. I hear the loons call, the baby flying over the island. I shiver in my fleece and lean against the railing Sarah's mom didn't want. I didn't even get to ask her if we could meet back in the city.

The sun beats down hot on my back, the water cool around me. My right arm comes up over my head, and then slips into the water. Cup and pull. Then my left arm, inhale, splashing into the water. I swim a few more strokes, shoulders contracting, and then reach for the air mattress, spitting water.

"You're doing great," Bubbie tells me. She lies on the mattress, paddling with her hands.

I nod, out of breath. It's not quite the way I wanted to swim to the island. However, as Bubbie says, it's better than becoming fish food.

I rest my head on the hot plastic, close my eyes against the bright sun, kick my legs. I glance over at Sarah's empty dock, the lawn furniture and fishing gear gone, even the canoe put away in the shed.

Bubbie follows my gaze. "I haven't seen Sarah in a few days."

"She's gone."

"Pardon?"

"Home. They went home."

"Oh. I guess it's that time of year. We'll have to pack up after lunch if we want to be in time to get your parents from the airport."

"She didn't say good-bye."

Bubbie frowns. "Maybe something came up."

I shake my head.

Bubbie shades her eyes, looks at me. "She's a slippery one."

I nod, avoiding Bubbie's glance, and slide off the mattress. I push myself under water for as long as I can and then break into front crawl.

I take another break, this time half way across the bay. Our dock seems far away, the logs on the other side equally hazy.

"I caught a frog the other day," I tell Bubbie.

"Tell me about frogs."

"*Phylum chordata, class lissamphibia* - that means its got a smooth skin," I tell her. "I always thought frogs would feel slimy. They're smooth, just like their name."

"Do you know those things from school?"

I laugh. "Bubbie, religious girls don't need to know about frogs, or birds or fish, except to know if they are kosher to eat."

Our days in school are divided into religious studies in the morning, and everything else in the afternoon. Science is crammed into two hours one afternoon a week. We read the chapter in our textbooks, answer the questions. The ecology sections are in the back of the book and we never get there by the end of the year.

"Are frogs kosher?" Bubbie asks.

"Nope, no fins or gills."

"Oh. They taste like chicken."

"So I'm not missing anything then?"

"You'd like to study more about frogs, about nature, wouldn't you?"

I laugh. "Yeah, sure."

Bubbie just nods, and so I swim again, practicing my breast stroke, like a frog.

At the island I stand on a fallen log and catch my breath.

"Looks a lot like the other side," I tell Bubbie.

"Yep." She points to a blue heron skimming across the water. I rest in the shade a few minutes and then Bubbie says, "We'd better get going."

"Five more minutes?"

"You don't want to be late for your parents."

I sigh and take one more look around. I grab hold of the air mattress next to Bubbie and together we push it with long lazy kicks.

At the end of the day I stand on the dock gazing out at the island. The sun sets pink and gold over the bay. I stay one more minute and then wrap my arms around a tree trunk before leaving to join Bubbie in the car. Now I know the feel of wet pine needles on my arm, the crunch of dry leaves in my palm, small berries rolling under my feet.

In the city I know all the surfaces already: concrete, linoleum, plastic, Formica, porcelain, all cold and hard. Polished wood at best, but with a layer of paint over top.

Fall

Chapter 4

Ima bursts out of the airport, her eyes glittering with an alarming intensity. Abba follows behind her, luggage-laden, jetlag etching his smile. They climb into the car showering us with kisses.

"You had a good time?" Bubbie asks.

"Wonderful," Ima says. She leans forward and squeezes my hand before putting on her seatbelt.

"Absolutely amazing," Abba says.

Bubbie pulls out of the airport into the maze of sun-scorched highway.

"It was just incredible," Abba sighs. "When we got off the plane we could smell orange blossoms. And I tell you, the land feels different there."

Bubbie rolls her eyes.

At the house Abba opens windows, turns on taps, sifts mail into piles. Ima grabs my hand and pulls me up the stairs with her suitcase. "I have so much to tell you." She closes the bedroom door and turns on the air conditioner. When she pulls off her blue cotton scarf, her rich brown hair cascades over her shoulders sweaty and threaded with grey. I notice the leather dye of her new sandals has bled into her white socks.

Most of Ima and Abba's room is taken up by the bed with its patchwork comforter. A low wooden dresser is jammed below the window, a small wooden table with framed pictures of Dad's parents, Bubba Rosa and Zeyda Yuri in the corner. The air conditioning gradually cools the room, cutting the thick humidity. I sit on the bed and stretch my T-shirt over my knees.

"So? Tell me about the trip."

Ima kneels on the floor beside her suitcase and starts filling a laundry basket with crumpled blouses and balled up socks. "It was unbelievable," she says. Outside a dog barks. "Wonderful," she repeats.

"Did you see the sea?"

"The sea? We went to Israel. It's a desert."

"Sand dunes?" I imagine sand fanning into ocean patterns, licked by the wind's tongue into crescent shaped grooves.

"No, it's more rocky and hilly."

"Oh."

"But it's ours." Ima's eyes flicker with excitement. She leans back on her heels, her arms wrapped around her legs.

I nod, letting my hair fall forward to hide my face. Neshama and I have had long discussions about whose land it is.

"That slice of sand and desert with its heat and all its troubles, it's ours," Ima continues.

"Here is all kinds of different people, not Jews." She takes a deep breath. "There the land is ours."

"The Kotel, did you go to the Kotel?" For weeks before Ima left, all she spoke about was the Western Wall.

"Oh," she flushes. "I'll have to tell you to about that later, when Neshama comes."

I stare at her sparkling eyes.

"Here," she says, digging in her bag, "I brought you something, a present." She pulls out a small plastic bag. I expect a book or a necklace, something Jewish.

"For you," she says stroking the bag, "I have brought," her voice dropping to a whisper, "a perfect Israeli specimen."

She sits down on the bed bedside me and pulls out a fruit, round like a tomato, the colour of an orange. I roll the rubbery sphere, my brow furrowed. It smells of the earth, not tangy or citric. "What is it?"

"What tastes like a peach, looks like a tomato, but is the colour of an orange?"

"You brought me a riddle?" I squint at Ima.

She smiles again and pulls my head close to hers until I can smell her familiar lavender scent. "Sultan's peach, Roman tomato, King David's orange," she whispers. She picks the fruit out of my palm, "This persimmon is my Israel."

She pulls a pocketknife out of her suitcase and slices the fruit into quarters. I pull the skin off with my teeth. The smooth peach-like flesh tastes like perfume.

"This persimmon is like smashing the cup at the end of a wedding," she says.

"Pardon?"

"It reminds me of our tenuous hold on Jerusalem. We own the land now, but around every corner I saw shades of the past, shades of how light our hold on the country is. Sure, we build new settlements to... to sink our teeth into the soil, but it's only sand. It crumbles, gives way. In this fruit," she grasps the remaining brown seeds from the persimmon, her knuckles white, "I see every army that ever passed through Jerusalem and I understand how lucky we are to have it."

"Uh... yes."

Ima cradles her bag of persimmons in her lap and then puts them on the bedside table next to the small copper lamp. "Did you have a good time with Bubbie?"

"Yeah, I had a great summer. I swam a lot and learned to paddle a canoe." Heat crawls up my face. "So you didn't swim in the Mediterranean?"

Ima zips up the empty suitcase and shakes her head.

Of course they didn't, not my modest, white-skinned parents. Not on the beach in Tel Aviv where I've seen pictures of scantily-clad Israelis in bikinis with uncovered hair, naked limbs. Like Sarah. I start to blush again and duck my head so Ima can't see. If I ever get to Israel, the ocean would be the first place I'd visit.

Ima has had a summer of heat that I imagine to be a blistering of sand in her eyes and the glint of sun off the windshield of a car. Ima has had a summer of sand and dust, while I have been learning to swim, crouched on the edge of the dock looking at crayfish, rising early to push a canoe through the quiet water to chase loons around the bay. I think of the wet mulch at the edge of Lake Missisagagon, the mist rising off the water, of Sarah paddling through the water, barely breaking the surface calm.

"Oh here, I brought you something else. It's from the desert and also the sea." Ima ruffles through her straw shoulder bag pulling out a handful of mints and then a film canister. "Hold out your hands." She pries off the lid of the canister and pours gritty bits of sand and then some tiny white shells into my hands. "It's from Mitzpe Ramon, this crater in the south."

I stare at the shells. "By the sea?"

"No, in the middle of the desert.

"There are shells there?"

"Yes, I thought you'd like that." Ima smiles at me.

I sift the sand, poke at the gritty bits, the small white swirls. I imagine the sea raging across the sand, and then departing, leaving remnants on the shores. I squeeze the bits in my palms. "What is this, evidence of Noah?"

Ima's back to sorting laundry. "Maybe." She glances up at me. "Where's your necklace?"

My hands fly to my neck. "I took it off to swim in the summer."

"It was Bubba Rosa's."

"I know. I just forgot to put it back on." I go get it from the suitcase under my bed and put it on. I lower the collar of my T-shirt to show Ima the small gold heart with the Star of David carved on it. The chain feels tight around my neck.

"Beautiful," she says and kisses my forehead.

The camp bus drops Neshama at home in the evening. She is tanned, blonder than before - streaks I suspect - and carries one more bag than she left with. I peer at it suspiciously.

Ima hugs her. "How was camp?"

"Wonderful, amazing," she says.

Abba studies her outfit, a three-quarter length sleeve sundress with buttons down the front, before he kisses her.

Upstairs she nudges the imitation Louis Vuitton suitcase under her bed. I raise my eyebrows. She pushes me into the bathroom, pink pearl nails fluttering, while Ima goes to get a laundry basket.

"Contraband," she hisses.

I raise my eyebrows.

"Things for you too," she adds.

"From camp?"

She shoves me into the towel rack. "No silly. We sneaked out." We hear Ima on the stairs. "Outlet mall," she whispers. "Wait till you see." She smiles and pulls her dress tight against her chest to show me the outline of her bra. It's not the shapeless beige kind Ima buys for us.

Neshama puts on a long sleeve cardigan, covering her forearms. "Don't want to piss off Abba too soon."

"What's up?"

"Later," she hisses.

After my parents have gone to bed, the air conditioner droning in their room, Neshama nudges the lacy pillows and teddy bears off her bed and spreads out her new treasures on the pink bedspread. Neshama's room is stuffed. Her dresser is strewn with tubes of lipstick, nail polish and jars of make-up brushes. Fashion magazines and romance novels spill out from under her bed. A shelf holds her collection of music boxes.

I wedge my feet between the pillows and bears and watch her spread out short sleeve v-neck T-shirts, and matching bras and underwear sets in stripes and lace trim. And then finally, a pair of slim-fit, faded Levis with orange tags and a button-up fly.

"Here," she say. "These are for you."

I clasp the jeans to my face, breathe in their new cotton smell, feel the stiffness of the material. I have never had jeans before. "Thanks," I whisper. I get up and step into the pant legs, pull them up over my hips, struggle with the buttons. The jeans rest just below my belly button. I look in the mirror at the long smooth line of my legs.

"Check out your butt."

I peer over my shoulder and swivel my hips like the TV ads.

Neshama giggles. "One more present," she says. She pushes a small pink plastic bag into my hands. I wrestle with the tissue and pull out a matching bra and panty set, satiny dark blue with only half cups and panties cut high on the sides. "It's the colour I imagine the ocean might be."

I squeeze her tight.

"Perfect for your future honey."

I shoot her a sidelong glance.

"What?" she asks.

I sit down at her desk, shuffle her papers into piles. I kissed Sarah in the clearing and her lips were warm and soft. "Not me, I mean, not now, I-"

"Just kidding." Neshama punches my shoulder. "Abba isn't really going to choose one of those pale, sick-looking *yeshiva buchers* for you."

"He'll find someone for you first."

"No, not me."

"Still leaving?"

"Yes." Neshama clasps a v-neck T-shirt. "Not much longer now." Her mouth forms a thin line. Chords stand out at her throat and temples.

"You still have another year of school, Ness." I fuss with the tissue paper, refolding the lingerie inside.

Neshama drops the T-shirt and sits on the edge of her bed facing me. She stretches out her hands in front of her, her knuckles straining, nails glinting in the lamplight. She lets out a big breath, "I enrolled myself in night school courses for this fall. This way I'll be able to take the math courses I need."

My eyes open wide. "Have you told Ima and Abba yet?"

She shakes her head.

"And Bubbie?"

"She knows. She's all for it."

"Will you wear jeans to school?" I blurt.

Neshama tosses her head back, throwing her blond hair over her shoulder. "That is so secondary. If I don't have the right calculus course I can't apply to university business programs. And Bubbie already promised to help me with the tuition."

I tug at the edge of the sheet on Neshama's bed. My parents want us to become religious schoolteachers like them.

"You could probably take night school courses too, you know."

"Really?"

"If you don't ask for these things, you'll never get them."

I sigh. "Thanks for the contraband."

Darting across the hall to my room, I tuck the clothes with Sarah's jean cutoffs and tank top into the suitcase under my bed.

Neshama has always been waiting to escape. When we were little she was sure we were born into the wrong family and no one knew except us. According to her, we weren't supposed to be daughters of reborn-Orthodox Jews, *ba'al t'shuva*, but part of a family of travelling circus performers or eclectic spiritual healers. At best she thought we belonged in Bubbie's "normal" world.

Bubbie also thought my parents becoming reborn Jews was a stage. She thought they would evolve to their Buddhist, health food and herbal supplement phase next.

We used to race home from school and climb into our tall plastic laundry baskets, and sail down the orange painted stairs to the front hall. When we got out, breathless, hair full of static, we were Andreas and Ivan, twin Russian tennis *and* chess champs with our own language. Down the stairs again and when we smashed into the front door, we were the Sweet Valley High twins with matching lavalier necklaces, perfect 5'6 blond bodies and boyfriends named Bruce and Todd.

When we were eleven Neshama got to take art classes at the JCC, a much-negotiated privilege she only obtained with Bubbie's help. Non-Jewish kids also took classes there and Abba worried about the wrong influences.

"Do you know," Neshama whispered to me one night after class, "that Christian kids think *their* God is right?"

Neshama and I used to play a game we called Escape! "What if you need to leave fast?" Neshama would ask. "What would you take?" We'd each grab a bag, or a suitcase, and we'd have a minute to pack. Then we'd meet in the basement to see what we'd taken. Sometimes the game was more elaborate. Neshama set the rules. "You're going away for a weekend in Paris." Most of the time, it was a bag you'd pack because you wouldn't be coming back. A fire in the house, or a knock at the door. Neshama started with clothes, or her small blue teddy bear, the bare essentials, then quickly moved to bigger heavier items, cramming her bags with felt pens and rainbow notepads, stuffed animals and her collection of "Little House on the Prairie" books.

I would spend most of the time weighing a favourite book over three pairs of socks. When we met in the basement, Neshama struggled under the weight of her assembled collection. I clutched a bar of soap, a toothbrush and a *siddur*.

"You'll be cold," she said.

"But clean," I replied. We stared at each other.

We stopped playing the game when Bubba Rosa, Abba's mother died.

Abba's parents lived in a small apartment over their dry cleaning and tailor shop off Yonge Street.

I remember them as people who held fear in their backbones, in the angles of their shoulders, a rigidity Abba inherited.

Abba's parents bent over the steamer, cut cloth, inhaled dry cleaning chemicals and lived their whole lives within the small confines of the shop. Passersby could watch Bubba Rosa eating a plate of cabbage salad, Zeyda sewing on his ancient Singer through the front window. Neshama once asked if he had brought the machine from Poland. Zeydi laughed. "I came with a pincushion, I should be so lucky." He always had a pack of yellow Chiclets for us in his breast pocket.

Zeydi once asked, "Who does Neshama look like?" He stroked her fine blond hair. Goldilocks he called her.

"My sister," Bubba Rosa replied. "My sister who was."

When Bubba Rosa died, less than a year after Zeydi, Ima gave Neshama and I each a garbage bag when we entered their apartment. I held a scarf Bubba had woven through my hair with her old gnarled fingers, felt it thin and worn, heard it swish into the bag.

They left behind broken china, cheap *chachkas*, endless pairs of pantyhose. I watched, their privacy invaded, as Ima cleared drawers of faded saggy underwear, cabinets of medicines long out of date. When she packed shapeless dresses, worn shoes with broken laces, I heard

Bubba Rosa's heavy accent, saw her old hands pressing a worn change purse full of silver dollars into my palms.

In the bedroom Neshama and I found a suitcase under the bed. Inside were pairs and pairs of new underwear, socks, pantyhose all still in their cardboard packages. Bars of soap, a shaving kit, sweaters, cans of tuna, and a bag of peanuts.

Neshama and I never mentioned the suitcase. We never played the game again.

Leaving was always Neshama's game, not mine. Now when I close my eyes I see Sarah beckoning to me as she glides in her cherry red canoe.

Friday morning of the long weekend I wake to the swish of the washing machine, clothes flapping on the line, the dishwasher humming.

Time at the cottage became a blur. Here at home we mark the days, cutting the line sharp between regular and sacred time. We order our weeks, months, into neat segments: work and rest, holiday and ritual. We sit heavier in our chairs on Friday nights, let the wood take the weight of our spines.

"Two weeks until *yontif*," Abba says, rolling out dough for cookies he will freeze.

"Eight hours until Shabbos," Ima says, running the vacuum in the living room.

Eight hours, enough time to move slowly in the humid heat, the windows open to birds and traffic. Shabbos doesn't start until sundown, 7:40. Time stretches out hot and slow.

I polish the Shabbos candles, set the table with wine glasses and the good china. When I'm finished, I fold laundry on the kitchen table: T-shirt sleeves in first, then bodies neatly tucked up. Underwear crotches up, sides in. I refold the tea towels Ima has shoved in the drawer.

Our kitchen is all yellow: both the sunshine cupboards with their old metal handles and the lemon yellow walls. The nicest thing about our kitchen is the floor, which is hardwood, although it needs to be refinished. The rest is awkward and old. The drawers either stick or come flying out, whisks, spatulas and soup ladles spilling to the floor. The tap drips or gushes, and the

kitchen window sticks open or dangerously smashes down unless propped with a brick. The gold-flecked Formica counters are knife-marked, rippled with age and crammed with porcelain containers for sugar and flour. Abba couldn't part with Bubba Rosa's old utensils. The heavy meat grinder she used for making chopped liver takes up counter space beside the oven.

The appliances and counter line the outside wall. The window over the sink looks out on the narrow strip of our yard. Our fridge is also yellowish and hums loudly. Neshama has clipped out ads for new kitchens and taped them to the refrigerator, hoping Abba will take the obvious hint. He never does, although he did buy an extra freezer to hoard his baking.

On the opposite wall our rickety kitchen table sits between the pantry and the door to the hallway. Above the table is a black and white photo my Uncle Isaac took of Ima. In it she sits in our kitchen, her arms crossed over her pregnant belly. Her cheeks are full and flushed, a band of freckles across her nose from the summer sun making her look almost tanned and robust. Neshama stands on a chair, pigtails sprouting out the sides of her head, whispering to Ima, her small chubby hand cupped to her mouth.

"What was the secret?" Neshama always asks.

"I don't know," Ima says. "I only remember Bubba Rosa was over teaching your father to bake."

Abba loves to bake. He forgets about his studies and teaching and spreads ingredients out on the counter: room-temperature eggs, butter, bags of flour, poppy seeds, squares of chocolate, tubs of sour cream and then he mixes, stirs, kneads, licks and tastes. He listens to opera, his beard full of flour. "Raisins," he sings along with *Carmen* or *Aida*, and he dumps a handful of raisins, thick and plump, into sweet cinnamon twists, or between layers of soft malleable dough. He makes *rugelach* with chocolate or cinnamon sugar filling, rich and oozing and buttery on your fingers. In his kitchen, blueberry bundt cakes slide from pans, the slow suck of air hissing steam. He makes yeasty *challahs*, with shiny yolk coating, flaky apple strudel dripping warm raisins and soft apple slices. His thin poppy seed cookies are delicious with tea. He makes *mandlebroit*,

crumbling and nutty, for dunking in coffee. He bakes yeast rolls and sour cream coffee cake and chocolate brownies, all of it producing rich, wafting aromas through the kitchen and into the very wallpaper on the stairs. Our kitchen is dingy and uneven, but saturated with the most delicious smells. "Your father bakes love," Ima says.

When I am done my chores I wander up to my room and flop down on my bed. My room is similar in size to Neshama's, but without all the stuff. I have a blue quilt, a whale poster over my bed and grey shag carpet on the floor. Shells Bubbie has bought me from Florida line the window sill. I keep my collection of fossils, polished stones and bits of mineral in my top desk drawer.

A lawn mower drones next door. Abba's opera blares from downstairs colliding with Neshama's radio. At the cottage there was just the water slapping against the shore. Sarah and I used to paddle through the marsh in the late afternoons. I was supposed to look out for logs, prevent the canoe from getting scratched, or stuck in the shallow, murky water. When we did get stuck, I'd watch Sarah's arms flex as she maneuvered us off a log. Later when we swam, she'd slide her jean shorts off her narrow hips. My face flushes, the hair on my arms standing erect. *Don't, Ellie.*

I pick up my *Chumash* from the shelf by my desk and flip through Leviticus, searching through the section on sexual taboos and laws about lepers. I've skimmed this a zillion times before, red-faced and giggling. We don't talk about this part at school much. I leaf through the pages until I find, "A man should not lie with a man the way he lies with a woman. It is an abomination and they should be put to death." Leviticus 18:22. I read a few more lines. Nothing about women.

The drone of the lawn mower grows louder, buzzing inside my head. I check the Hebrew translation. Yes, *toevah*, an abomination, death. I shudder a moment and flop on the bed. How can a man lie with a man the way he does with a woman? Are people really put to death, or is it

like when the Torah says to stone people who don't keep Shabbos? I close the book and slide it onto my bedside table. My temples throb, my whole body hot as though I've got a fever.

Outside the mower turns off and just the traffic on Eglinton and Abba's opera wafts in my room. I get down on the floor and do pushups until I'm panting hard on the grey shag.

In the bathroom I turn on the shower and sit in the tub. I let the water rain down cool on my head, slide down my back, like it's a rainstorm. I scrub my skin hard until it sloughs off in small tawny piles.

I change into the tank top and shorts Sarah gave me, flop down on my bed with the phone book. I scan the list names until I find a M. McMullen, Sarah's mom, living in Toronto.

I dial the number, my pulse racing. The phone rings four times, and then an answering machine picks up. "Please only leave a crucial and short message," Sarah's mother demands. I hang up without saying a word.

What do I want to say, and how short can I make it? I dial again, gritting my teeth. "Hi, this is Ellie Gold, from the cottage. And, I was wondering, if you could, call me back. 482-2942."

When my heart calms down I shove Sarah's tank top and shorts back into the suitcase and change back into my skirt and blouse. I head down the street to my friend Becca's house to pick up my fish.

Becca Klein is my closest friend. She's tiny with long brown hair and shiny eyes.

She answers the door. "Hey, you're back." She puts down her littlest brother Yehuda and we hug. Yehuda cries and she picks him up again.

"Yeah, I got back yesterday."

"So, how was the cottage?"

"Good, really good. What did you do all summer?"

"Oh, you know, babysitting. Boring but I made lots of money."

As the eldest girl of seven kids, Becca spends a lot of time looking after her younger brothers and sisters, as well as her neighbour's kids. She has more money saved than anyone I know, but she doesn't know what she's going to spend it on.

Becca puts Yehuda in a playpen and we go upstairs to the room she shares with her two sisters.

"How are my fish?" I ask as we climb the stairs.

"Oh, well..."

"They didn't all die, did they?"

"No, only some of them." She giggles, "the kids wanted to feed them all the time. I'm really sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

Becca shows me the fish tank. Rashi, Golda Meir and Shalom Alechem swim around the fake plants and little castle, but Ben Gurion and Hannah Senesh are no longer.

"I felt so bad so I taped you this special about giant squid. It was almost interesting."

"Yeah, what's it about?"

"Oh they stick these cameras on whales to go really deep in the ocean. And, there's these really hot guys in little shorts who are scientists."

I sigh.

Becca helps me clean out the tank and I listen to her talk about the cute boys at the park.

"Where there any guys up at the cottage?" she asks.

"Um, not really,"

"Oh, that's too bad."

"Yeah," I say.

Back at home we eat a late *Shabbos* dinner, the light dimming, birds still fluttering in the windows. I remembered to keep *Shabbos* the rest of the week at the cottage. I'd recited the

blessings by myself, Bubbie watching indulgently. It wasn't ever the same as home. I didn't want to leave the lake, but I've been looking forward to sitting down with Ima, Abba and Neshama and to sing *Shabbos* songs.

Ima leads us in *Shalom Alechem*, her beautiful breathy voice sending shivers down my spine. She closes her eyes and grips the table with a new intensity. When I hear her clear voice, the jigsaw pieces of my life settle back in place.

Ima blesses the *Shabbos* candles, her face hidden behind her hands. She rocks back and forth, her voice barely audible. Abba blesses the wine and the *challah* and then he leans back in his chair and chants *Eishet Chayil* to Ima. She hums along with Abba, smiling. Neshama picks at a hangnail. I wriggle back and forth on the wobbly antique chair with the needlepoint cover.

When Ima became religious, she let Bubbie's canaries out of their cage. Bubbie found them dead in the yard, trampled, one of them missing a wing.

Ima only sings folk songs or religious music. In the morning sometimes I hear her in the kitchen singing, "*We went down and wept and wept, by the water of Babylon.*"

"Israel was wonderful," Abba says to Neshama and me when he finishes singing. "You must see it for yourself one day, perhaps for a honeymoon." He smiles at us. Neshama looks down at her lap. My throat constricts and I cough into my napkin.

Abba stretches back in his chair. "It's good to be home." He motions for us to stand, to come over to his chair. He places his warm hands first on Neshama's head, then mine, whispers the blessing for children.

"*May you be like Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca and Leah.*"

I don't hear the birds or the traffic, just Abba's words.

"Did you know," Abba asks, passing out bowls of gazpacho, "that the Talmud says God gave ten measures of beauty to the world, nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest."

"The old city was really amazing," Ima sighs. "You have to imagine, you're in this modern city, and then the next thing you know, you're walking up this slope to Jaffa Gate."

"Your mother was so excited," Abba adds.

"There are ramparts on one side, and then city below. I kept thinking of the crusaders riding up to that gate, and then the Caliph of Omar, and then finally the Jews."

"You can't believe how hot it was. I've never *shvitzed* like that before in my life."

"And then when we got to the gate, your father knew exactly how to get to the Kotel."

"I'd memorized the map on the plane."

"We went through the Armenian quarter and then through Zion Square--"

"I wanted to stop at the Hurva Synagogue, but your mother wanted to go right to the Kotel."

"So is the wall amazing or what?" Neshama interrupts.

"Well, it was actually smaller than I expected." Ima leans her elbow on the table.

"There were soldiers everywhere."

"And the women's side is much smaller than the men's--"

"Wait," Neshama says, "why's the women's side smaller?"

Ima shrugs. "Don't ask. Anyway, when I got to the wall, I suddenly knew exactly what I had to do."

Neshama and I exchange looks.

"I have a plan."

Neshama stops eating. I clench my napkin in my fist.

"I figured it out at the wall." Ima smiles. "First, I started to *daven mincha*, but then, I couldn't believe it, this woman beside me started talking on her cell phone."

"Can you believe, at the Holy of Holies?" Abba adds.

"And not quietly either. In this loud Russian voice."

"Then what happened?" Neshama demands.

"Well, I found a different place by the wall, in the shade away from the woman with the cell phone, and that's when it happened." She smiles that distant smile again.

"What?"

"I had this wonderful realization. It was like, I knew exactly what I had to do."

I start to slowly shred my napkin. "Which is what?" I ask, my voice hesitant.

Ima braces her hands on the table. She takes a deep breath. "I have to help Jews be more observant."

I squeeze my napkin into a ball.

"Don't you already do that at the school?" Neshama spears spinach with her fork.

"No," Ima clutches her water glass. "It's going to be more than that. The students at school are okay. It's those other Jews, the ones who live without *Hashem*, I'm going to teach them."

Neshama swallows a mouthful of salad. "Oh," she says. She reaches for the pitcher of water and fills her glass. She drinks the whole thing down in one long gulp. She puts the glass down. "I'm glad you know what you have to do. It's good to have focus."

"Yes," Ima says. "I want to give something back to *Hashem*." Her eyes focus. "I want to help others."

There's a long pause. "So what exactly are you going to *do*?" Neshama asks.

"I'm going to write a book, or maybe only a pamphlet."

"And?"

"And then visitors."

"What will they do?"

"Well..."

"And then the visitors will learn," Abba replies. "They'll learn the laws and understand *Hashem*."

"Will you help me?" she asks us.

I shift uncomfortably in my chair. "What will we have to do?"

"I need you to be ambassadors."

I nod uncertainly. I curl my toes, looking down at my plate. Neshama has already begun her escape and I, I push the thought away.

Ima devours another bowl of salad and two slices of cornbread. After we clear the dishes Abba leads us in *zemirot*, our voices filling the dining room. I watch Ima sing, her head sliding slightly to the side and back, her words clear, her eyes half closed.

It makes sense Ima should take on some sort of spiritual leadership. I just don't get why we have to be involved. I see the way Ima grasps the walls when she prays, the way she slowly rocks. Not like some who pray just to fulfill the commandment, Ima sways slowly, absorbing each prayer. She could spend an hour on a single word, letting it rise up from her toes to fill her body. In other religions she would chant loud, lead congregations and inspire them with her fervour, but not ours. Women aren't supposed to sing in public because of the law of *Kol Isha*. A woman's voice can lead men to think unholy thoughts.

Neshama and I retreat to the back porch steps after we clean up the kitchen. I feel parched, my throat dry like a desert wind has blown in. We sip glasses of water and watch for raccoons. A maple tree sways in the centre of the narrow stretch of our yard.

"What will the visitors do exactly?" I ask Neshama.

Neshama swings her legs over the edge of the porch and rests her head on the railing. "She's going to proselytize. Not like the Hari Krishna's or anything, but same idea - proselytizing." Neshama drags the word out like it's from the *sitra achra*, the other evil side.

"Door to door?"

"No you goof, she's going to join one of those groups, you know, some Shalom Agency, and try to convince people to be as observant as them, to, you know, save them. At. Our. House."

"*Has va'halilah*. Why does she always have to do weird stuff?"

"'Cuz she's a stra-a-a-nge woman."

"I wish she didn't involve us in her plans."

We're silent a moment. Neshama pulls up her skirt and studies her shin. I sip my water.

"You never asked about the cottage," I say tentatively.

"How was the cottage?" She concentrates on picking an ingrown hair.

"It was good." I smile.

"Let me guess," Neshama says, still picking. "Bubbe snuck cigarettes, watched birds.

You had cocktails at five, deli at six, and oh, you were all excited because you did something gross with amphibians. Right?"

"Yes, but there was more."

"Yeah, so?"

"There were other people there."

"Boys, I mean men?" Neshama stops picking and looks up suddenly interested.

I pause not sure how to answer. "No, not boys. A girl. I made a friend. She's not Jewish."

"Big deal. Girls, shmirls. I had an entire summer, please, an entire life of girls."

I ponder this, the idea of a summer camp of nothing but girls. I turn to Neshama, "Look." I pull down the neckline of my blouse and show her the white strap marks of my bathing suit.

"Bubbe bought me the suit."

Neshama looks at my shoulders and then opens her blouse. Her shoulders are perfectly golden without a single mark. I raise my eyebrows.

She does her blouse back up. "Do you think I should change my name to Nicole?"

"No. When are you going to tell them?"

"About what?"

"You know, the school."

Neshama shrugs. "Bubbe said she'd help. It'll be less messy."

Neshama gets up and goes into the house. I hear her on the stairs and then in her room. She flicks the lights on and off a few times. I pull the canister of sand and shells Ima brought me out of my pocket. I sift it in my palm.

Ima wants to hold the land, mark it with edifices. I glance down at the shells. The land will always break free of buildings, weeds peeking through concrete, overpowering even Jerusalem stones.

Saturday morning I breathe in familiar synagogue smells: old moldy books, perfume, furniture polish. I stand in the lobby and inhale deeply. I pause in the lobby to peer into the men's section, and look up to the *bimah* where the Torahs are kept in their red velvet dresses and silver crowns.

My heels click on the metal edges of the narrow linoleum staircase leading up to the women's section in the balcony. In our synagogue men and women pray in separate sections so we won't be distracted. I take my seat next to Ima and Neshama and wave at Becca and my other friend Esther. I survey the women, my gaze lingering over the burning red hair of Tova Suttner, recently married and therefore probably pregnant or almost pregnant. She has the same rippled hair as Sarah, thick with the weight of curls snaking down her back. I shiver and turn away.

Little girls dance over the red and emerald patterns the stained glass windows throw on the faded carpet. The men's voices rise from the main sanctuary. Ima, Neshama and I sit at the front of the balcony where we can see the sun shining on the wooden pews below.

We stand to recite *Shacharit*. When I open my book, the words taste like familiar food on my lips and tongue. My voice resounds with the other women's, blends in with the men's downstairs. I sway slightly from side to side.

I have been waiting all summer to pray with other people. At the cottage my voice was swallowed up by the breeze.

Ima and Neshama quietly pray beside me, mumbling the prayers under their breath. Downstairs the men race ahead, bursting into communal song. I skip ahead to quietly join in the singing. I begin the *Amidah*, bow to the right, left and middle, take three steps forward and three steps back as if approaching a King. All around me women chatter, “chicken only three ninety nine a pound,” trade endless compliments on a new hat, a new baby. Downstairs the men sing “God is King.”

When Neshama and I finish praying we sit down to listen to the chanting of the Torah. I straighten my pale blue tube skirt, cross my ankles. The shul is warm and I sweat in my white blouse. I lift my hair off the back of my neck, pull it into a loose ponytail with the elastic from my wrist.

Ima doesn’t sit. She stands swaying side to side, her face buried in her prayer book. Her blouse is modest, her heels of medium height, but everyone else is sitting.

Neshama pokes me, “What’s she doing?”

I shrug back.

Mrs. Bachner, who sits by the door, her hooded eyes sliding down the dresses of the women who pass by her to go to the bathroom, stares at Ima. Her thin eyebrows rise. Mrs. Bachner looks for slips showing, for blouses too open at the neck. Her eyes scrutinize children for snotty noses, for sugar cubes clutched in sweaty palms or melting in hot mouths.

Ima inhales deeply, her hands clasped tightly, her lips moving.

Neshama tucks her feet tight under her chair, shifts her hands under her knees and scrunches down in her seat. I can feel the eyes behind us bore into our backs, can hear Mrs. Bachner’s *tsktsk*. Ima could at least stand in the back. She buries her face in her book, oblivious to the whispers behind her.

The low hum from the women’s section rises to a strained buzz. I grip the velour edge of my seat. Neshama and I roll our eyes at each other and Neshama’s lip rises in a sneer.

Ima finally sits when the rabbi gives his sermon. Neshama sighs, her shoulders sinking.

I excuse myself to go to the bathroom where Neshama and I used to eavesdrop from the last stall during services. From inside a cubicle I hear Sari Blum say to her mother, "Who does she think she is, the messiah?"

Becca is waiting for me outside the bathroom. She grabs my hand. "What's with your Ima?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I have no idea."

Bubbie comes over after shul, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. She wears a tennis skirt and heels, her tennis shoes peeking out of her oversized white leather purse.

"So, how's God today?" Bubbie asks Ima. Bubbie relaxes against the armrest of the beige couch. We are in the living room, Ima, Bubbie, Neshama and I. Abba is still at shul talking to the rabbi.

Ima perches on the wing chair, ignores Bubbie, smooths her skirt over her lap. Bubbie continues. "So the trip was good?"

"Yes, excellent." Ima's eyes take on the same dreamy glitter as the day before. "I heard you and Ellie had a good time."

"Yes, educational too," Bubbie says.

Ima looks over at me sitting on the footstool. "Educational?"

"You know the birds and trees, that sort of nature thing."

"Oh."

"Actually I've come to talk to you about school. Of course it's none of my business Annabelle..."

This is a familiar line with Bubbie. "Of course it's none of my business Annabelle, but you really shouldn't wear yellow, or you really shouldn't serve potatoes and rice in the same meal."

Bubbie continues. "Neshama has something to ask you."

I hold my breath. Neshama sits tall on an oak dining room chair by the fireplace. "I'd like to know if I can take night school courses," she states, like she's reciting a speech. "I've thought this out very carefully," she adds. "I need, well, if I don't take them, I won't have the right courses for university."

Ima blinks twice as if clearing cobwebs out of her head. "Night school. University," she parrots. "Right, of course. What courses do you need?"

"Finite and calculus."

"And doesn't your school teach those?"

"No, Ima, they don't." I can hear Neshama's frustration.

"Why would you need calculus?"

"If I'm going to study business, those are the courses I need."

"Business?"

"Yes."

"And work where?"

Neshama colours a little, "Oh, I don't know. I'm thinking finance."

"Finance? Wouldn't you have to work on *Shabbos*?"

"Maybe," Neshama says flatly. She plants her feet on the floor.

Bubbie crosses her legs, dangling a high heel off her bare foot. "Annabelle, you have to be realistic. The girls don't want to be teachers. And not all people in finance work such crazy schedules. You can still be *frum* and make money. And really, how do you expect the girls to support themselves, or families, anyway?"

Ima ignores the jab at her and my father's jobs. It took Ima and Abba forever to save for Israel and even then Bubbie gave them some money for the trip. "To stay in a proper hotel," Bubbie said, "not freeloading at some other religious people's house with all their *meshugana* children."

"Is that what you really want to do?" Ima asks. She settles further back in her chair, her hands listless in her lap.

Neshama nods.

"Oh," Ima says. She cranes her neck around to look at me. I lie on the floor, my legs twisted around a chair. "Ellie?"

"Fish," Neshama says, before I can respond.

"Pardon?" Ima asks.

"She wants to study something to do with fish and rocks," Bubbie explains.

"A zookeeper," Neshama offers.

"Oceanographer," Bubbie says.

"Ellie?" Ima asks.

"Echinoderms," I murmur. I taste the shape of the word on my lips. I have never said it aloud before.

"The girls need to follow their interests," Bubbie says. "You know, explore. Just like you did. Turkey for you. University for them."

Ima blushes slightly. "I went to university."

"You didn't finish."

"Tell us about Turkey, Ima," Neshama says.

"Oh, you've heard it a million times."

"Well then how about the nun stage?" Bubbie suggests.

"The nun stage!" Neshama exclaims.

I unsnake my limbs from the chair and roll over onto my side. Every time Bubbie gets Ima to talk, we learn something new.

I pull myself up and rest my head against Ima's chair. "You wanted to be a nun?"

Ima pulls her legs up to her chest. "I never told you how I wanted to take a vow of silence?"

"In Carmel California, mind you. Be the bride of Christ." Bubbie crosses herself.

"It was a very spiritual place."

"So why didn't you go?" I ask.

"I was going to--"

"--but Zeydi swore he'd never talk to her again," Bubbie says.

"He was always threatening that."

"He wouldn't have been able to talk to you if you were in a silent convent," Neshama adds.

"That's true."

"So what happened?"

"I met your Abba."

Neshama frowns. "That always happens just when a story is getting good. Some guy shows up and that's the end."

If it's not a guy, then how does the story end?

"So I can take night school?" Neshama asks.

Ima doesn't respond.

"Annabelle?" Bubbie asks.

"Call me Chana," Ima whispers.

"Ima?"

"You'll do what you want, won't you?"

I look at my feet. Bubbie jiggles her shoe on her foot. Neshama scrunches up her shoulders, tucks her hands under her legs.

"Yes, I guess I will."

There is an awkward pause.

"There, that's done," Bubbie says, clapping her hands together. "Isn't it nice to have adult daughters who can make independent decisions?"

The front door rattles open and Abba enters the living room. "Shabbat Shalom," he says to Bubbie.

"The same to you."

"Are you staying for lunch?"

"No I was just here for Neshama's news."

"What's that?" Abba eyes Neshama.

"She was just telling us about the night courses at high school she and Ellie will start next week."

Abba pauses standing in the doorway to the living room. He taps the wall, absorbing Bubbie's words. "Good, more school. Education is important. What will you take?"

"Ellie will take geography, and Neshama calculus." Bubbie is unable to keep the note of triumph out of her voice.

"And you need this why?"

"For our lives," Neshama responds.

He is silent a moment, rubbing his fingers on the wall. Neshama glares at him. "Respect your parents," He mumbles in Hebrew. Neshama drops her eyes and Abba taps the wall again.

"How... how will you dress when you go to *goyishe* school?"

"Like this," Neshama replies. Abba scans Neshama's straight blue skirt and the tight sleeves of her cotton cardigan.

"You will wear your school uniform instead," he announces.

Neshama shrugs, "I don't care what I wear."

"A girl without *s'nioot* is like a house without curtains, like a-

"Yes, yes Avram," Bubbie says, "we've all heard your opinions on this before." Bubbie yawns and stretches a slightly wrinkled but still shapely bare leg as she stands up. She blows kisses at us, and Neshama and I pluck them out of the air, plant them on our cheeks. Ima reaches for her air kiss too, staring at Abba as she absentmindedly pats it onto her cheek. Abba has

wandered into the dining room. He stands at the table, fingering the edge of the tablecloth, giving the edge little shakes, moving the ceramic fruit bowl to the sideboard.

“Avram?” she asks.

“I’m thinking,” he replies. He doesn’t look up from the cloth.

Neshama and Bubbie go to the kitchen to make tea.

Ima turns to me. “You want to study science?”

“Fish and rocks and volcanoes.”

“Rocks?”

“Yes.” I turn myself upside down on the old wing back chair, hair hanging on the floor, long legs dangling over the armrest. “Not only sedimentary and igneous, but volcanic.” I think of hot lava pouring over a volcano’s edges. “Did you know,” I swing myself back upright, “that you can tell the age of the earth, and it’s old, so old it’s even older than...”

I once asked Mrs. Green, my grade three teacher, how the dinosaur bones could be older than the creation of the earth. She said God put the bones there to test our belief. The answer didn’t really bother me. In my mind dinosaur bones and God were in separate categories, but Neshama almost cried when she heard the answer.

Abba rearranges the fruit bowl and comes back into the living room. “These rocks and fish, how will they make you live better?”

“Oh Abba, it’s not about that.”

“Ellie,” he says, sitting down next to Ima, “If it’s not about that, what good is it?”

Neshama sticks her head in the room. “It’s not for her soul. It’s for her mind. So it grows and expands.”

“And you can’t do that with *Torah*?”

“You can.”

“So?”

“It’s just not the only way.”

“But it’s the best way.”

“For you maybe.”

Abba doesn’t say anything, and again I see them locked eye to eye.

“Neshama is only half right,” I say softly. They turn to look at me. I usually avoid involving myself in their arguments. Like water off a duck’s back, I just let Abba’s *chutzpadik* flow over me. “Volcanoes and rocks, they’re science, but *Hashem* created them. And if we don’t learn to protect them, then we are ruining God’s creations. That’s got to be from the *Sitra Achra*, right?”

Abba smiles at me, laughs out loud. “A tongue she has,” he says, rubbing his hands together. “With it you will argue Torah well,” he announces.

“And not fish and rocks?”

He ignores me and turns to Neshama. “And you and your calculus, it will bring you to *Hashem* too?”

“No, it probably won’t,” she replies, her face poker straight.

“You did the right thing,” Bubbie tells Ima after we’ve left the room. Neshama and I listen from the kitchen.

“She’s saying something about you,” Neshama whispers. “She is saying you’re the dangerous one cause you’re all quiet. The quiet zookeeper.”

“Naturalist.”

Neshama turns away from the door and goes back to preparing lunch. “El, why the hell would you want to study animals?” Neshama squishes a boiled egg under a fork, carelessly mashing it. Little bits of yolk speckle the counter and my arm.

I shrug. “I like fish.”

Neshama makes a face. “To eat maybe.”

Bubbie comes into the kitchen to say good-bye. She pulls her giant white purse over her shoulder. "All set girls, you can go enroll yourself at the high school, in fish and trees and numbers."

"Environmental science and geography," I say.

"Whatever." Bubbie waves and closes the door behind her a little too loudly. Neshama takes off her cardigan and does a silent boogie dance while carrying the plate of egg salad sandwiches. I jump around with the plate of pickles, not a word coming out of our mouths. From the living room we hear Ima quietly crying. Our dance comes to a sudden stop, plates of pickles and egg salad suspended in the air.

Chapter 5

Before my parents were religious, they wandered, lured by the city lights.

To hear Abba and Ima talk now, my father's job on Bay Street was Sodom; Eaton's, where my mother worked, Gomorrah.

My father was born Abraham Gold, the only son of Rosa and Yuri Gold, Holocaust survivors. My Zeyda Yuri was a tailor, a diabetic, a small quiet man. Bubba Rosa was even smaller, perhaps more silent. Abba went to university, became a lawyer, fulfilled his immigrant parents' dreams of financial and material success in their new country. Abba never moved out after he graduated, preferring to stay with his parents in their cramped apartment in his childhood room with the baseball posters.

My mother, before she became religious and took on the name Chana, was Annabelle. She dropped out of the university after a year and took a job at Eaton's working in the scarf department, much to Bubbie's disgust. First Ima was into EST and transcendental meditation and then there was the nun phase I recently learned about. Finally a friend invited her to a religious dinner. "It was the music that got me," Ima always says. "I'd never sang on Shabbos before. Bubbie lit the candles, muttered a prayer, and then we ate. At this religious dinner people opened their hearts and thanked God for their food and the day of rest with the most beautiful songs."

Ima met Abba at that first dinner. Disillusioned with his law practice, Abba was also looking for something more. A friend had taken him to a religious dinner and he slowly thought about becoming observant.

Ima said, "Your Abba had a deep baritone voice and when he sang he closed his eyes."

Abba says he fell in love with Ima because she wasn't only concerned with appearances. That year, before *Rosh Hashana*, she gave him two scraps of paper to put in his pockets. One said, "I am but dust and ashes," and the other, "The world was created for me."

He still keeps those crumbling pieces of paper in his wallet. "When I see them," Abba says, "I remember my own mortality and my role in life. I also think of my wife's beautiful heart and her love for *Hashem*."

Abba and Ima are now both teachers. Ima went back to school to become a preschool teacher and Abba teaches *halacha*, Jewish law, at the boy's high school. Neshama likes to refer to the material of Abba's classes as "mountains hanging from threads," zillions of Jewish laws derived from scant scriptural basis.

On the first day back to school, the weather still humid, Neshama and I don our uniforms with our usual post summer despair. The small rounded collar blouse and long navy pleat skirt makes me look like a stork dressed in children's clothes.

Neshama and I sit in Abba's huge station wagon, the vinyl seats streaking our thighs with sweat. I slowly pull each of my knuckles until they crack. At a red light Abba turns and looks at us over the back seat.

"I want you to do the ritual washing of the hands each morning when you get up," he announces.

"Abba, we wash our hands in the morning anyway," Neshama says, staring out the window at the traffic. "That's basic hygiene."

"Yes, yes, but the prayer, you must do the prayer. I'm not talking hand scrubbing, soap, the nails, I mean ritual."

Neshama and I don't respond. We sit on opposite sides of the car watching the traffic. Abba makes a left-hand turn.

The *Torah* commands us to wash our hands before we eat, which makes sense to me. Even Bubbic agrees. "Those ancient Jews had some good ideas," she likes to say. "Imagine, all that grit and sand under your nails."

Neshama and I say the prayer at home with Ima and Abba before we eat and at school where everyone lines up at the sinks in the cafeteria, otherwise we don't bother.

"Yes," Abba repeats, "you must do the ritual hand washing when you wake up." He waits for us to ask why as he slows down for the light at Lawrence Avenue.

Neshama eyes him from the back seat. She yawns, "Abba you're not going to tell us some crazy stuff about the devil sleeping on our hands at night, are you? Because Leeba Weinstock already asked about that in Q and A, and Rabbi Lowenstein said-

"No it's nothing with the devil," Abba interrupts. "No devil involved. No," he pauses, "It is because sometimes during the night, we don't... we don't always have control of our bodies." Abba clears his throat. "It is possible one may," he coughs, "touch parts of the body that are not clean. So, you should wash your hands when you wake up. Then you can be assured cleanliness."

Heat reaches up from my collar. The tips of my ears burn.

"Sounds like the devil sleeping on your hands to me," Neshama mumbles.

Abba looks at Neshama in the rear view mirror as he pulls up in front of our school. Neshama stares back while she takes off her seatbelt. "Look," he says, still staring into the mirror. "You will be going to your *goyische* classes soon. You may come upon new temptations."

"Yes, Abba," we say quickly, "bye Abba," and we bolt out of the car.

"Unclean my foot," Neshama says with disgust. "My body is a holy temple and I," she throws her arms over her head dramatically striking a pose, "and I am the priestess." People walking by on the street glance our way. "Another dumb rule made up by dumb men to squash women to honour some dumb god." She goes around the back of the building to look for her friend, Ruchi, leaving me blushing on the sidewalk.

Ruchi is Neshama's best friend since kindergarten. She has stick straight brown hair and the biggest boobs of any girl at our school. So big, Neshama says Ruchi always has marks on her

shoulders from her bra straps. Ruchi's sister Jill is my study partner for Mishna class. I usually eat lunch with her, Becca and Esther.

Ruchi is the oldest of six. We're the only family I know with only two kids and that's because Ima couldn't have any more kids after me. "Thank God," Neshama always says. "Could you imagine having a zillion brothers and sisters? I'd never get new shoes."

Ruchi has been busier than usual because her mom has been sick a lot lately. Neshama says she's had so many kids her uterus is practically hanging out of her body.

Neshama and I aren't as sexually ill-informed as most of our school friends who only glean sex education from older married sisters or cousins. Bubbie bought us *Our Bodies, Ourselves* which we've read cover to cover. The only Sex-Ed we get at school is from Mrs. Lowenstein, the Rabbi's wife. She talks to us once a year about The Laws of Family Purity, which basically boil down to menstruation being *tameh*, unpure, and how you're not supposed to have sex or touch your husband when you are bleeding. Blood is always bad in Judaism, bad enough for married women to have to go dunk themselves in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, to purify themselves after they finish menstruating. No matter how Ima and Mrs. Lowenstein go on about what a spiritual uplifting experience the *mikvah* is, Neshama is convinced period blood as unpure is just superstition.

Mrs. Lowenstein only visits once a year, but she keeps a box in the office where you can write her a note. You don't use your name or anything, just put some code on the note so that you can pick it up from her box later.

I sit on the front steps and get a notepad and pencil out of my bag. I tap the pencil on my knee. *I'm in love with a girl*, I write. I look at it on the paper, feel my throat tighten. Traffic rushes by on the street. A stream of students pass up the stairs.

Does Leviticus 18:22 apply to women? I pause, biting on a fresh eraser. It breaks off in my mouth and I chew it into rubbery bits. Finally I write, *What should I do?* I tape the edges of

the note together and assign myself the number 613. Before I go to class I carefully spit a mouthful of eraser shreds into the bathroom trash bin.

After school Becca invites me to come over to her house. "Esther is going to come too. She just wrote a new song and she wants to play it for us."

"Oh, I just need to do something first."

"Well I can wait for a few minutes." Becca adjusts the straps on her backpack.

"No, that's okay. I need to get home after that."

Becca frowns. "On the first day of school?"

"I'll call you," I tell her.

Becca turns to go, disappointed.

I wait a few minutes until she and Esther get a head start and then I head down Lawrence to Sarah's school, Havergal College. Sarah still hasn't returned my phone messages, so I figure I'll go see her at school. She might not have heard the messages, or maybe she has her own phone line.

I pass quickly by the front entrance with its gothic windows and turreted stone tower and head around the back down a path to the playground and playing field. By the tennis courts I sit at a picnic table and pull a copy of Neshama's *Seventeen* out of my bag.

"I didn't know you were interested in fashion," Neshama said when I asked to borrow it.

"I want to read the article on anorexia," I lie.

She fixed me with her piercing stare, but I glared back.

I borrowed the summer issue, filled with lots of bikini pictures. Girls cavort on beaches or pose by pools, their breasts barely covered by string bikinis, their nipples pointing through the sheer tops.

The girls finally come out of the school and disperse to cars, waiting buses and down residential streets. I slip the magazine back in my bag and start to stroll around the grounds. The

girls carry stylish backpacks slung over their shoulders, their long hair swinging down their backs.

If only I wasn't wearing my uniform. It's too hot for my new jeans and I'm too embarrassed to wear my shorts in public. I tried the shorts on this morning and looked in the mirror. My legs were thin and gawky and naked looking.

On my second rotation around the school I spot Sarah under some elm trees in the back corner. Talking to a boy. A private school boy.

I wedge myself against the fencing of the tennis court. Sarah stands legs wide apart, hands on her hips. She smiles at the boy and shoves him square in the chest. He reels back against a tree, his arms crossed casually across his chest. He has freckles across his button nose and sandy hair.

I bet he used to sing in a boy's choir until his voice broke. Now he probably plays rugby and is on the debating team. His mother even plays tennis at the same country club as Sarah's. I watch them walk away, his hand hanging at his side, dangling close to her. He lets it graze her fingers and then slips it into the grey flannel of his school pants. I bet his mother calls them trousers and irons them for him in the mornings.

I head home slowly, walking away from Sarah and the guy. It's probably just a show, her liking boys. She has to cover up, like me, be seen with boys. She'll call back soon, but not too soon. She likes me, I know she does.

Ima is waiting for me in the kitchen when I get home. "Ellie," she pounces, "will you listen to this?"

Ima has hounded me to listen to parts of her book ever since she got home.

"Hi Ima," I say, "How was the first day back?"

"Good, good. Tell me how this sounds."

I stand in the kitchen still holding my backpack.

“Orthodox Jewish marriages are successful,” she reads from her notebook, “because of the lack of dating.” What do you think? Too awkward?”

“It’s a little awkward,” I admit. “I mean, the meaning is good, it’s just... a little unclear.” I shuffle my feet, tap my keys on the counter, start edging into the hall. Ima’s book is part self-help, part introduction to Judaism.

“Oh, OK,” Ima nods and scribbles something in the margin and continues reading, “When you hold the hand of your future spouse, a bond forms that can never be broken.”

“Whose hand?”

“Oh, I’m talking here about when you hold your husband’s hand, the connection you feel.”

“I... I think you need to give a specific example, actual people.” I imagine how it would feel to hold Sarah’s hands, the bite of her nails leaving crescent moons in my skin.

Ima’s eyes light up, “Ellie you’re right!” Ima stands in the doorway of the office a moment, scribbling in a yellow spiral notebook, her limbs coiled tight with energy before she sits in front of her computer.

Ima and Abba’s office is a tiny room off the kitchen. One whole wall is lined with bookshelves, the other wall houses a desk, and various framed certificates and old pictures. There is Bubba and Zeyda’s wedding photo, a childhood shot of Ima with her parents, and a deliciously seventies’ picture of my parents: Abba without a beard in bell bottoms and a turtleneck sweater, and Ima in an orange print dress with an empire waist line. Abba stares right at the photographer, but Ima looks somewhere off to the right, her eyes not quite focused.

“Ima looks different these days,” I comment to Neshama back in the kitchen.

Neshama closes the fridge door holding a piece of cheddar, a glossy red apple in her teeth. “Saving the world is a heavy call.” Her voice is garbled by the fruit.

I lean on the counter by the sink. “Yes, but she looks happier.”

“Drugs,” Neshama whispers, taking the apple out of her mouth.

"Pardon?"

"Can't you tell? She's all edgy and her writing is funny."

I nod slowly.

I lean out the doorway of the kitchen and peer across the hall to the office. Ima sits at her computer, pounding on the keys, eyes shut. She squints at the screen a moment and then types some more.

"Apple?" Neshama asks behind me.

I turn my head, "No thanks."

Neshama takes an enormous bite, slurping at the juice. "Smart fruit," she says.

"Uh-huh." I lean back into the hall.

Ima pulls a fresh page from the printer. She reads it over, then leans forward and licks the words, one long reach of her tongue from the bottom of the page to the top. I watch her rip off a corner, put the scrap in her mouth. She rests back in her chair, chewing.

"Just think about Eve," Neshama says behind me.

I turn around, "What?"

"You weren't listening."

I rub my forehead a moment. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

Neshama does a pirouette, chucks her apple core in the garbage. "I was talking about Eve and how lost we'd all be without her."

I pour myself a glass of juice. "Wouldn't we still be blissful in Eden?"

"Yeah, but stupid and naked and probably drooling. And without meat for dinner."

Neshama flexes her stomach muscles.

I down the glass of juice. "That doesn't sound so bad."

Neshama hip checks me on her way to the refrigerator. "Yeah, except it would be boring as hell. If Eve hadn't given Adam a kick in the pants to eat the apple, we'd all be stupid still.

Apples are full of truth and knowledge."

"So, Eve's your new personal hero?"

Neshama nods and takes the elastic band out of her ponytail. She smooths down her hair looking at her reflection in the oven door. "I bet if Eve, or some other woman, had been at Sinai instead of Moses she would have heard different commandments."

"Like what?"

Neshama flexes her stomach muscles, watching herself in the reflection. "I don't know, just something about respect and equality, and not all that fearful God stuff."

I shrug. "Maybe."

I walk by Sarah's school every day on my way home. I do a quick rotation of the building to see if she's around and then keep on going. On Thursday I almost bump into her on the front sidewalk as she comes bounding out of the heavy wood doors of the front entrance. I break into a smile when I see her long hair fluttering down her back.

"Sarah."

She spins around. "Hi. What are you doing here?" She searches over my shoulder for someone.

"I'm just on my way home from school."

"Oh," she glances up and down the street. "So, what's up?"

"I was wondering..." Sarah waves at someone over my shoulder. I turn and look at the guy with the sandy hair I saw her talking to earlier in the week. She smooths back a ripple of hair. "I have to go. It was great seeing you."

"Oh, well maybe we can get together later."

"Sure Ellie, whatever. I'll call you."

I smile, "That would be great."

"Just not now." She backs away.

"Oh."

She takes off down the street.

I slowly start walking down Avenue. She just doesn't want me around at her school, I can tell. I bet her mom comes home really late and she's lonely at night. Maybe I could invite her to our house, for *Shabbos*. Yeah right.

At the library on the way home I head to the World Book Encyclopedia. When I think no one is looking I pull out "H" and head to the very back corner and wedge myself between the stacks of books. I take a deep breath. It's just research, and not necessarily about me. I'm just reading. I open the "H" and flip to homosexual. What an ugly word, like a disease. I skim through the entry and learn that some homosexuals may be attracted to members of the same sex and the opposite sex. I also learn that young people may only be exploring with members of the same sex and not really gay at all. I also learn that in some countries and parts of the US it's not even legal for men to be gay. It doesn't say much about women. I go back for the L volume but there's nothing about lesbians. Only an entry for the Island of Lesbos: it's part of Greece and it grows vegetables.

I leave the library somewhat relieved. Maybe we just experimented, maybe I'll grow up and learn to like men. Maybe.

On Friday afternoon all the senior girls at the David and Esther Kaufner School have a question and answer period with Rabbi Lowenstein in the *beit hamidrash*, the room where we pray, meet for assemblies and have religious classes. If there are no questions, Rabbi Lowenstein gives a *drash* about the weekly Torah portion. We file into the room and seat ourselves among the tables and chairs strewn across the middle of the room. Bookshelves line the walls, a series of high windows overlook Bathurst Street. In the far corner is Rabbi Lowenstein's office, a paper and book-jumbled mess with overflowing filing cabinets and an enormous picture of the old city of Jerusalem.

When Rabbi Lowenstein asks if there are any questions, Neshama marches up to the lectern, plunks her notebook down and pushes her beautiful golden hair over her shoulders. "I have a question," she announces.

Rabbi Lowenstein is a tiny man in his late sixties with a gray beard, crinkled brown eyes and a rounded belly. Unlike the rest of our teachers, he talks, leaning back in his chair, without using his hands to accentuate his points.

"Go ahead," he says.

Neshama plants her feet apart in her pleated school skirt, flips open her notebook to a yellow highlighted page, and looks directly at Rabbi Lowenstein. "Is it permissible to listen to rock music?"

I notice some of the girls looking at each other, shock and horror registering on their faces. The whole front row rises slightly in their seats. Behind me I hear Neshama's friend Ruchi suck in her breath.

Rabbi Lowenstein strokes his beard. He pauses a moment, "You want to listen to *goyishe* music?"

"I want to know if it is permissible by Jewish law."

Rabbi Lowenstein strokes his short gray beard. No one moves, not Neshama poised in front of the lectern, her hands balanced on her notebook, and not Rabbi Lowenstein.

"Well," he finally announces, "I think there is some music prior to 1958 that could be acceptable."

The class releases a collective sigh.

"But there's no law that specifically says..."

"Neshama-leh, you just listen to the words," Rabbi Lowenstein interrupts, "and if they promote Jewish values, or at least don't desecrate them, then you can listen."

Neshama nods and takes her seat.

"Wow," I hear Ruchi whisper behind me, "that was crazy."

At the end of the day I check Mrs. Lowenstein's box. A small envelope with the number 613 waits for me. I shove it in my pocket and scurry outside to the parking lot behind the bank next door. I lean against the brick wall, take a deep breath and rip open the envelope.

Dear Student 613, Mrs. Lowenstein writes.

Lots of girls your age get schoolgirl crushes. It's really nothing to worry about. Most girls outgrow the crushes when they leave school.

About Leviticus 18:22. You are right that it only applies to men. However, women are also prohibited from having homosexual experiences in the Shulchan Aruch (20:2).

It's important to remember that people overcome evil impulses every day. I myself sometimes feel like saying something hurtful to one of my family members or even hitting them, but, Baruch Hashem, I have the power to control myself.

Evil impulses are often just like a bad habit. You can change them! I think of them like biting your nails, or chewing on the ends of your hair. Reciting psalms or giving yourself a pinch when you feel yourself guided away from the path of Hashem is a good way to stop yourself from committing a sin.

Please write again if you need advice, or make an appointment if you'd like to discuss this or any other matter in person.

Zai Gazunt, Mrs. Rabbi Lowenstein

I stand on the pavement gnawing on my lip. Evil impulses, like wanting to yell at Abba that he's crazy or give Ima a shove when she stares endlessly out the window. I stop myself every time. But Sarah is different.

Becca and Esther pass by me on the way out of the school.

"Hey Ellie," Esther calls, "are you walking home?"

"Not quite yet," I manage to say. Becca looks away. All week she's been talking to me about some boy. "You're not listening," she accused me.

I push through the heavy double doors back into the school, weave between the streams of students still exiting the building. I head up the linoleum stairs, my school bag bumping against my hip, back to the *beit hamidrash*.

I need to know exactly what the *Shulchan Aruch* says. Maybe kissing a girl is only a minor misdemeanor and I can just wash my hands in the morning, or say an extra prayer.

I enter the empty room, scan the shelves for a copy of the *Shulchan Aruch*, and slide into a chair behind a bookshelf by the back corner.

I flip through the pages. Sexual relations between women are forbidden, the punishment: lashes.

The fan whirs above me, cool air swirling down over my sweaty head. A sob catches in my throat. Eyes closed, I take some deep breaths until the tears recede.

Hunching over my lap, I read Mrs. Lowenstein's note again. My head aches and my hands leave sweaty splotches on the thin paper. *Evil impulses*. I choke back a nauseous feeling welling in my throat. I carefully hide the note in the inside pocket of my coat.

I wipe my eyes and blow my nose. Rabbi Lowenstein enters the room just as I am replacing the book.

"Doing some homework Ellisheva?" he asks pleasantly. He balances a stack of texts against his chest.

"Oh, just some research," I mumble, staring at my loafers.

"Very good. It's nice to see a student starting the year off right." He glances at the cover of my book. "Doesn't your father teach *halacha*?"

"Um, yes he does."

"Well I'm happy to answer any questions you have. I'm sure your father is a great help."

I blush. "Yes, yes he is." I smile weakly and nod goodbye.

I burst out of the building and jog toward the ravine, not stopping until I reach the slope down into the trees. The dense green foliage tunnels the sun-dappled path, the maples touching overhead. Shuffling toward Bubbie's house in Forest Hill, I pass afternoon joggers in sleek spandex, moms walking their kids, elderly couples, their lapdogs yapping at the squirrels.

"Ellie, come on in." Bubbie plants an air kiss near my ear. I breathe in perfume, cigarette smoke and blue cheese. I follow her through the paneled hall past the living room with black and white floral wallpaper. Bubbie's house is full of pristine white sofas and black, hard-edged furniture.

She wipes her hands on the apron covering her wool slacks and turtleneck sweater. "I'm just cleaning up from my bridge group. The girls brought all this sumptuous food. Would you like some sandwich loaf?" She points to a cream cheese covered dome of bread layered with tuna, egg and salmon.

"Is it kosher?"

"Kosher style."

"Neh."

"Here." Bubbie reaches into one of her white kitchen drawers and takes out a box of kosher biscuits she keeps for Neshama and I.

She carefully covers the sandwich loaf, her fuchsia fingernails snared in plastic wrap.

I take a bite of biscuit. "Bubbie, these are so stale."

She shoves the box in the trash. "Well, you obviously don't come by often enough."

"I've been busy with school."

"Ah, are you reading good stuff?" Bubbie rummages in her enormous refrigerator, pulls out a plate of raw vegetables.

I nod vigorously. "I'm reading about the ice age and how the glaciers carved the rock. You know, the Canadian Shield."

"Sounds great. By the way, did you ever hear from that Sarah?"

"No... I left a message, but she hasn't returned my call."

"That's odd." Bubbie scrubs her hands at the sink. "Did you have a fight or something?"

"No, not really." I pinch my hand, grasping the flesh between my knuckles, squeezing until it hurts.

I take a deep breath, "I wanted to ask you something--"

Bubbie interrupts, "Let me just get one thing. I'll be right back."

I hear her climbing the stairs as I wander through the kitchen. A stack of dirty china plates with pink roses wait to be washed by the sink. Silver monogrammed dessert forks dry on a dishcloth. I sit down at the kitchen table and pull out Mrs. Lowenstein's letter. *Evil impulses are often just like a bad habit.*

I used to suck my thumb and chew my fingernails. Neshama picked her scabs until they bled. I pinch my hand again, my fingernails leaving white impressions in my knuckles.

When I hear Bubbie coming back I ram Mrs. Lowenstein's letter in my pocket. Bubbie pulls out a chair next to me and puts a pink floral cosmetic bag on the table. She uncaps a bottle of nail polish remover and starts rubbing off the fuchsia polish. The acrid smell burns my nostrils.

"You didn't like that colour?"

"I thought I'd go back to this one. She lifts a bottle of burgundy polish with the tips of her fingers. "More subdued. You wanted to ask me something?"

"Oh... I wanted to ask you... do you think people can change?" I twist the polyester edge of my skirt, lean on one elbow.

"Can you do my right hand?" Bubbie holds out the cotton swab. "What do you mean?"

I hold her wrist, rub the polish off. "Well, just become different."

"Your Mom," Bubbie says, "certainly changed. From Eaton's and her scarf collection to that convent thing and now this, this new plan."

I nod.

"How's she doing?" Bubbie asks. She looks up, raising one eyebrow at me.

"Um... well," I think of Ima licking the paper. "She's okay, I guess. Pretty excited about her book and all."

Bubbie pulls her hands away from me. She files away a rough edge of her nail. "She's all right though, eh?"

"Um, yeah, I think so."

Her eyes search mine for a moment and then she goes back to her nails. She draws burgundy polish over her thumbnail in one long stroke. "Your sister," Bubbie says, "she is determined to change."

"Yeah maybe. That's not what I really mean. Besides, Neshama isn't changing that much."

"No?"

"Well, she's always wanted to be different."

"I guess so." Bubbie appraises her nails. "She's very focused too." She holds out her fingers. "Do you like this colour better?"

I nod yes, chew on a hangnail.

"I'll do yours if you like," Bubbie offers.

"Neh, I don't think Abba would like it." I kiss Bubbie's cheek. "I gotta go."

"Stop by again soon."

I jog through the ravine back home.

Neshama and Ima slowly transform day by day, Ima into her own self-styled prophet, Neshama into Bubbie.

Sarah wants to become a stripper instead of a private school girl.

Me, I just want to be normal.

At home I find Abba spreading mayonnaise over a salmon fillet in the kitchen.

"Hi Abba."

"Hi. Can you set the table?"

I nod and start pulling dishes out of the cupboard. "Can I ask you something?"

Abba starts washing small red potatoes. "Shoot."

"Jews are chosen, right?"

"Right."

"Well, what if you do something that makes you un-chosen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, let's say, you're like Bubbie, and not religious."

"You're still chosen."

I pull out place mats from under the counter. "What if it's something worse, like. . . like you're a leper."

"A leper?" Abba turns to look at me.

"Just say someone was."

"Lepers are still part of the chosen. Jewish lepers, that is."

"Okay, what about if you do something the Torah says you shouldn't do, and you do it regularly and know it's wrong."

"You're still part of the chosen, you're just not living up to your potential. What's this all about?"

"Oh, nothing really."

We are quiet a few minutes. Abba turns on the radio to "As It Happens."

I finish setting the table. "Abba, do you ever find a part of the *Torah* you can't follow?"

"Like what?"

"Um... well, oh forget it."

I decide to bite the inside of my cheek where no can see, and to memorize the periodic table of elements whenever I think of Sarah. I'm not keen on psalms.

Sunday morning I get up early and Abba drives me to the Ontario Science Centre. Other than the ravine, this is one of my favourite places. I used to beg Ima to take me here at least once a month.

“So what are you going to see today,” Abba asks me.

“Ima found me these shells in Israel in the desert, in Mitzpe Ramon.” I pry open the lid on the canister of sand and show him the white swirls. “I want to learn more about them.”

“Shells in the desert?”

“Yeah, water used to cover everywhere, even Israel.”

“Interesting,” Abba says. “Do you need a ride home?”

“No, that's OK. I'm meeting Becca later.” Becca has convinced me to sneak into *Dirty Dancing*. Neshama has started rumours at school, hushed whispers about the bulge in Patrick Swayze's dancing pants. Becca has been talking about it all week.

Abba drops me off and I head up to the natural science exhibit. The shells Ima found are actually a fossil called Ammonite, part of a squid-like marine animal that existed from the Paleozoic era to the end of the Cretaceous era. The Egyptians considered the fossils to be divine and called them Ammonite after the God Ammon.

On the bus to the movie theater I think about the patterns the sea would have left on the sand as it receded. The sea was there before Abraham and Sarah, before there was even the Torah. No wonder the Egyptians thought Ammonite was divine. If we still prayed to the sea, loved it, the way Jews loved *Hashem*, we wouldn't dump toxins in our lakes, or over fish our waters. We would pray for the sea's health and abundance. I shiver at the thought of a Divine Sea. Out the bus window all I can see is endless concrete buildings and asphalt roads. I could take the subway all the way down to Lake Ontario but there too is just a concrete shore. All I have is where water used to be.

I meet Becca at the theatre at Yonge and Eglinton. She giggles with delight. I keep glancing around us nervously. We don't see anyone we know. The theatre lights go down and the music comes on. Becca fixes her eyes on Patrick Swayze's swiveling hips. I keep mine on Baby's.

"Bye guys!" Neshama yells and then slams the door behind us. We take off down the street giggling, on our way to our night class. The evening is warm, the sunlight fading. We stop at the corner and pull off our school blouses, T-shirts underneath.

At night, without the milling students, the public high school is just a building, linoleum floors, chalkboards, desks and chairs, not so different from Esther and David Kaufner, except for the boys. I choose a seat in the environmental science class by an open window, stare out at the passing traffic and the gravel field behind the school. The room is disappointingly similar to my regular school, the drone of the 401 in the background like a cloud that follows me around the city. I chew on the end of my pencil, the rubber eraser squishy between my teeth.

At the cottage hummingbirds whirled around the feeder. Bluebirds cawed for peanuts. Sarah swam, her bare arms and legs glimmering wet; her hair alive, like rippled grass down her back. Sarah. I bite my cheek, glance at the elements I copied onto my wrist: *Hydrogen, Helium, Lithium*.

I watch the other students file in, boys in baseball caps pulled low over their foreheads, girls in short skirts and tank tops. I glance at the exposed dewy shoulders of the tank top girls, then turn away. Boys, I'm supposed to check out the boys. An older guy with stubble and a baseball hat studies his fingers. Another kid with hair hanging over his face stares out the window.

The teacher hands out textbooks. On the cover is a picture of the ocean crashing. Inside are the words I've been looking for: *molten, estuary, erosion*. Pages and pages on volcanoes spewing, landmasses slipping, tide lines ebbing. I can smell the salt of the sea, hear the bubble of

lava, feel plates shifting. I imagine Sarah expertly maneuvering her canoe. I bite my cheek, *Hydrogen, Helium, Lithium, Beryllium*. At the end of the hour I realize I have chewed the eraser heads off each of my new pencils.

At home in bed I flip through the textbook until I am too tired to read anymore, until my mind is saturated with sand dunes shifting, glaciers carving paths and leaving lakes behind. Like when I swam with Sarah, the way she teased me, the delicious scent below her ear. I bite my lip. I must want to change, become the person I was before the summer, the Ellisheva Gold whose name means 'God's promise,' the Ellisheva who wanted to marry the ocean, but would settle for living by it.

A car passes, the headlights flashing shadows across the wall. Yes, change. I clamp my cheek in my teeth. *Boron, Carbon, Nitrogen, Sarah, Oxygen, Sarah*, like breathing oxygen.

By Yom Kippur I know big chunks of the periodic table backward and forward. I know which elements form ionic bonds and which are least reactive. Since I can rattle helium to lithium and think about Sarah's hips at the same time I've decided to memorize the Latin for echinoderms instead, starting with Sea Stars: Sunflower Star, *Pycnopodia helianthoides*.

At shul, I sit between Ima and Neshama at the back of the balcony. The fans swirl warm air above us, the men's chanting rising from below. Neshama slumps in her chair, her head tipped back, silently counting the lights in the ceiling. She absently pats her growling stomach, licks her lips. Ima stands to my right, swaying, quietly mumbling prayers with the rest of the congregation. Neshama and I purposely led her to the back, just in case. She stood all of Rosh Hashanah, *shuckling* and singing. She didn't sit down except for the sermon.

For once the women's section at Beth El is quiet. People are tired, hot, hungry, faint, perhaps even involved in prayer. Whispered greetings are the only conversation. Requests for forgiveness, the response nodded. All the best for the New Year. You too, have an easy fast.

Not even Mrs. Bachner notices Ima. She's busy with her daughter and her five grandchildren visiting from New York.

We stand for the confession, Neshama wiping her forehead and sighing for the zillionth time. The shul is always too hot on Yom Kippur and we're always overdressed in our new fall clothes. My tan jacket with the shoulder pads and big buttons rests in a wrinkled heap on the back of my chair. I chant, *God and God of our fathers, pardon our sins on this Day of Atonement. Forgive us the sin of disrespect for our parents. Forgive us the sin of licentiousness, unchastity, wanton looks. Forgive us the sin we committed by unclean lips. Forgive me for holding Sarah's salty shoulders, kissing her minty lips, wanting to stroke the curve of her waist.*

I jolt my eyes open, cheeks burning. My tongue flits to the raw sore in my mouth, making me flinch. I reach my hand around to the back of my head, twist a strand of hair around my index finger, and pull, the hair ripping at the roots.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

Neshama picks a hair off my shoulder. "That thing with your hair."

"What are you talking about?"

She holds up a dark strand. "This."

"Just forget it," I whisper.

Two weeks of cheek biting and my mouth is so raw, blood oozing, I've decided to pull my hair instead.

Neshama shrugs and focuses on pushing back her cuticles.

I open my book again. *Please forgive me for girl lust. Please help me change. Please.*

We stand for the *Torah* reading, a quiet chorus of women's voices rising. I hear Neshama on my left, and then Ima's voice, pure and clear. She sings out, her eyes closed, her hand across her heart, her voice round and whole, but breathy at the edges, as if she's singing with all the air from her lungs, her chest pushing out.

Ima's voice soars louder and louder, sending shivers down my spine. In it I hear true contrition. Mrs. Zissler glances back at us, then Mrs. Blume. Mrs. Bachner turns and makes a *tsktsk* noise. My shoulders tense. I look at Neshama nervously.

Neshama whispers, "Ima?" Still Ima sings.

Mrs. Bachner's daughter turns around and stares. She wears a long navy suit buttoned all the way up to her chin and a high collared white blouse but her left eye is swollen closed, the skin a fresh blue, almost purple, fading green at the edges. I draw in my breath.

Ima hits a particularly high note and Neshama finally pokes her in the ribs. Ima's eyes fly open, her voice breaking off. She looks startled.

"You're too loud," Neshama hisses.

Ima looks around, as if trying to recollect where she is. "Am I?"

Neshama gives a quick nod.

Ima blushes and straightens her blouse. She tucks a strand of hair more firmly under her hat, opens her prayer book again, mumbles quietly under her breath. She sits when the rest of us do.

Throughout the Torah service, my fingers reach up to the base of my skull, trace the spot where I've been pulling hair. I imagine Sarah's hands, first just touching my neck, caressing my head, and then when she pulls me closer, she tugs on my hair, her lips teasing my ear. I grip my prayer book tightly, flick my tongue against the sore in my cheek. I skim the portion, trying to follow the chanting. After the *Torah* service I excuse myself and go down to the bathroom.

In a bathroom stall I lean my forehead against the plaster wall, take some deep breaths.

I hear Sari Blum whisper to her mother by the mirrors, "Mrs. Bachner's daughter is here without her husband."

"Really? Alone for *yontif*?"

"Wouldn't you be with that eye?"

On the way back I pause at the open doors of the main sanctuary. I peer into the men's section at the sea of bobbing white backs, rows of *kippah*-clad heads. Men and boys, this is what I'm supposed to like. Danny Durshiwitz, the cantor's son, walks back my way. We used to play tag at recess even though he made speeches in class about the inner workings of the brain. I haven't seen him since we went on to high school. I should have a crush on a boy like him: tall and dark, although, Danny isn't exactly handsome. He's too thin, and his face has broken out in crusting zits. He catches my eye and I quickly step out of the doorway and head back upstairs.

Chapter 6

Every year at Halloween Neshama and I begged to go trick or treating. We would choose costumes from the dress-up box at Bubbie's, then wait to ask Abba.

"Abba, can we please go trick or treating this year?" Neshama asked politely. She wore a ballet tutu with a turtleneck underneath and her thick navy school tights. I was a cat with paper ears attached to a headband, and a painted-on nose and whiskers.

We sat on the edge of the bathtub watching Abba trim his beard. Our bathroom had an old mauve toilet and matching sink. The tiling in the tub had started to drop off, dotting the tub and whoever was in it with bits of plaster. Ima had tried to make the room more inviting with mauve floral wallpaper and matching towels, but the accumulated steam and lack of fan made the paper peel at the corners.

Abba looked at us in the reflection of the mirror. "Trick or treat? And have the whole community see my girls like *goyishe* children asking for candy?"

Neshama clasped her hands to her chest. "Abba please, we'll go near Bubbie's house. No one will see us."

"Ima got to go when she was a kid," I added. "We saw the pictures. She was a princess one year, and a bride and-"

"No." Abba's voice was muffled as he trimmed the hairs near his nostrils.

"Just for a half an hour? We won't eat anything until we show you."

"No." Abba put down his scissors and held the door open for us to leave.

"Just one street?"

"Out!" We scurried to the door. "I can't think how you want to have a holiday where they throw eggs at Jews' houses."

"That was just a prank, Abba," Neshama insisted, standing in the doorway. Rabbi Abram's house had been egged two Halloweens before.

"Like a pogrom." Abba's face grew red, spittle flying out of his mouth.

"You think the kids went looking for a house with a *mezuzah*?" Neshama's cheeks grew equally red, her hands coming up to enunciate her words.

Abba turned back to the mirror. "Scratch a goy and you get an anti-Semite," he mumbled under his breath.

"Abba! That's not true," I insisted. Mrs. Kilpatrick was my math and science teacher that year. We got to do science fair and I built a volcano and won the prize for the school. I couldn't go to the city fair because it was on *Shabbos*.

Ima stuck her head into the hallway. She stood behind us at the entrance of the bathroom in her burgundy terry robe, her hair bound up in a towel. "What kind of *mishegas* are you filling their ears with?" Her quiet, controlled voice made me feel queasy. She pushed past us into the bathroom and locked the door behind her. "You teach our children to hate? Nu?"

I've always thought Abba was religious because of the Holocaust. I once overheard Bubbie ask Abba why he "bothered keeping all those crazy rules." Abba said that if the Jews had been more observant, the Holocaust would never have happened.

"Bullshit!" Bubbie cried. "Is that what your parents believed? No!"

Abba shrugged. "That's my opinion."

When I ask Bubbie about it later, her nostrils flared in disgust. "Ellie," she told me, "the Holocaust happened because Hitler was crazy and because no one cared a damn about the Jews. Now it's not like that. Everyone likes us, in Canada anyway. We're like kosher WASPs."

Ima was so angry with Abba she packed us up that Halloween eve and let us choose costumes from the dress-up box at Bubbie's. We helped Bubbie give out chocolates and then walked around the neighborhood looking at other children's costumes. We didn't knock on any

doors, but Ima gave us kosher milk chocolate bars. We both chose to be fairies, and wore pink tulle crinolines under our duffel coats.

“Can we go walk in the ravine?” Neshama asked.

“Ooh too scary,” Ima whispered, her eyes twinkling. She took us to the edge and we looked down into the dark trees. The wind knocked the bare, dry branches together and the street lamps cast the trees into long shadows. The light illuminated part of the path down the bush-covered slope, and the red and gold leaves covering the bushes. A breeze fluttered behind us, sending leaves skipping past our ankles and into the ravine. Chills ran up and down my arms and legs. “That’s where all the ghosts live,” Ima whispered into our ears, pointing down into the dark. Neshama and I shivered, stomped our feet and clung to her hands.

Neshama and I fell asleep on the white wicker couch in Bubbie’s kitchen, our tummies full of chocolate and milky tea. Ima and Bubbie sat at the kitchen table, drank Kahlua, got drunk and cried.

Every year when we made our annual Halloween plea, Abba said, “Wait to the spring for Purim. Then you can dress up and eat candy ‘til you’re sick.”

“Great,” Neshama always said, her voice thick with sarcasm, “another holiday about people trying to kill the Jews. Let’s cel-e-brate.”

“At least the Jews didn’t get killed that time,” I always pointed out.

“Yeah, and in the end,” Neshama added, “we kicked *ass*. We killed everyone.” We didn’t talk about this part of the story much at school.

On Halloween this year I tell Neshama I’m going to the library after school. As soon as she’s out of sight, I head towards the subway instead. On the way I stop at the drugstore to look at magazines. I scan the shelves. Lady’s Fashion. Home Decorating. Sports. My eyes stop on the very back shelf, caught by the gleaming plastic cover of *Hustler*. I quickly glance around me and lift the plastic-covered corner, nudge the magazine out of its slot. A brassy blond pouts on

the cover, her pointy nipples overlaid with a thin layer of black lace descending down her belly to meet in a tiny V at her crotch. The full part of her breasts jut around the thin, black strips.

"Jordan, a bedroom, a video camera and you." My face grows hot and I quickly drop the magazine back in place. Boys, Ellie, find some boys. Pecs, and abs and bulging jeans. I crouch down and look at the teen magazines. *"Boys: What Every Girl Wants,"* the headline of *Teen* reads. I flip through pages of advertisements and features on holiday dresses, (sparkles and stars for you) the new bangs (ten easy steps), and a centre section of boys. Pages and pages of shirtless, hairless, glossy boys with pecs, abs and tight jeans.

On the way to the till I spot a stack of cheap plastic witch and goblin masks. I stroke the rough edge of the plastic. Sarah is probably dressing up for a party right now. Maybe if I walk by her house, I'll ring the doorbell and say trick or treat.

I buy a witch mask, the magazine, a bag of salt and vinegar chips and head to the subway. At Rosedale, where Sarah lives, I get off and walk west through quiet streets of stately houses with stretches of manicured lawns. Elaborately carved jack-o-lanterns burn from front porches. Pictures of witches hang in bay windows or sway from brass doorknockers. I pull the mask out of my bag, but it makes me feel more self conscious, so I pull my toque low over my forehead and snuggle my chin into my navy scarf. I've worn my long shul coat to cover my uniform.

Children scuttle down the sidewalks with their parents, preschoolers dressed like giant green or red insects, boys as action figures, girls in princess glitter, older kids as ghoulish Halloween monsters. The streetlights flick on, casting circles on the neat shrubbery, pruned bushes and smooth driveways full of mini vans and BMWs.

I shuffle through the dry leaves on the tree-lined boulevard. The houses, Tudor trim or old brick with leaded glass windows, loom large.

I'll knock on Sarah's door and say, "trick or treat, I just happened to be in the neighborhood." I'll lift my mask and give her a dazzling smile. She'll be just putting on her bunny costume for a school dance. Or maybe a Hawaiian outfit with a grass skirt and a bikini

top. She'll say, "Ellie, I'm so glad you're here," and then ask me to the dance. We'll make me a ghost costume so no one will know who I am, and then we'll dance to "Stairway to Heaven."

That's what Neshama says they play at the end of every school dance.

I turn the corner onto Sarah's street, Briar Hill.

Maybe I'll just keep my mask on and ring the bell for candy, see if Sarah recognizes me.

I'd go in, but I'm wearing my school uniform with the dorky blouse.

I start counting the numbers toward her house.

Maybe I'll just wait 'til she comes outside, and then I'll go talk to her. I can hide in the bushes.

Sarah's house is brick with wooden trim. A hall light illuminates a living room and farther back, the kitchen. A jeep is in the driveway.

I walk by without stopping.

I circle the block three times, munching on the chips. On my fourth round, the door opens and Sarah's mom gets in her jeep, her coat open over a tight flapper dress and fishnet stocking. Her breasts peek over the top of a heart-shaped bodice, a giant green feather sways from her head. She drives off, leaving the house totally dark.

I sigh and start walking back.

I'll go by Sarah's school and see her there. She's probably decorating the cafeteria right now with orange and black crepe paper and blacking out the windows with garbage bags. I could still wear a ghost costume, or even just the mask. We could dance a fast song with lots of other girls.

I shiver on the cold, deserted street and cram a handful of chips in my mouth. Ima will be wondering where I am.

On the subway back home, I flip through the teen magazine. *Ten tips to thicker eyelashes. Are your breasts too big? The secret inner passions of New Kids On The Block's Joe McIntyre.* I flip to the centrefold. Joe McIntyre stands shirtless, oiled, his chest hairless, nipples like raisins.

His dark hair is combed back except for one greased piece falling over his lowered, sultry eyes. He looks mean and unhappy. The photo cuts off his legs just below the bulge of his jeans. Sarah's nipples are more like Rosettes, bigger and pink. I twist a lock of hair behind my ear, and then slowly pull at it. Blood star, *Henriscula levisca*.

"You might think a delicious hunk of malehood like Joe McIntyre would be all ego, but Joe is just like any other guy. He likes football, pizza, watching action movies and hanging out with his friends. He also likes spending time with his family. 'My mom is great,' Joe confesses. 'She really understands me.'

"But Joe has one difference. Millions of young woman swoon whenever he appears on stage."

At home I flop down beside Neshama on her bed and pass her the photo of Joe McIntyre.

"Would you swoon?"

Neshama uses her nail file as a bookmark in her calculus textbook and studies the picture.

"Cute," she says "very cute, but way too girly."

"Girly? I'm practically... swooning."

"You don't look like you're swooning." She flips the magazine to the cover. "And since when do you read *Teen*?"

I shrug. "Some girls in my geography class were talking about him." I take the magazine from her and open back to Joe. "You're not into cute?"

Neshama stands up and nudges aside a stack of notebooks. "I want a man, a real man, not some cute little boy. Like Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*." She swivels her hips. "He was hot." She grabs one of the small makeup jars off her dresser. "Want an oatmeal mask?"

"Um, no thanks." I run my fingers over my face.

Neshama kicks skirts and school blouses into her closet and stands in front of the full-length mirror on the door. She pats white paste across her forehead.

"So, who do you think is, like, a real man?" I pick a romance novel off the carpet and shove it back under the bed.

Neshama smiles into the mirror. "Have you checked out my calculus teacher?"

"Mr. Silva?"

"No, not him." Neshama looks at me disdainfully. "He teaches algebra. Mr. Keating teaches calculus. He's *so* hot." She puts the jar of mask on her desk with her collection of music boxes.

"Isn't he a little old for you?"

Neshama hugs her arms around herself. "Men, Ellie. I want a man, not some girly boy. Mr. Keating has *such* a nice body." She twists one leg over the other. "I can't wait to graduate." She shuffles papers on her desk, "Wanna see something cool?"

"Sure."

She hands me a sheath of forms.

"What's this?"

"University applications," she says.

"Wow. They're all done?"

She does a pirouette. "Yep."

"Business?"

"A-huh. U of T and York. I just have to show them to Ima. Wanna come?"

"Now?"

"Now." She heads toward the door. "This is the first part of my magic disappearing trick."

I follow her down the hall. "What?"

"Just watch."

As we head down the stairs we hear Ima singing from the office. "*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*"

Ima sits in her office in front of her computer, wearing a long pink nightgown and gray fuzzy robe. She squeezes her eyes tight, a persimmon gripped in one hand, a pencil in the other.

At first Ima just stacked the persimmon in the fruit bowl on the dining room table, a pyramid of orange balls like waiting ammunition. I imagined her handing them out in airports like the Hare Krishna. Then she kept a few persimmon by her computer and one in her purse. I saw it roll out onto the kitchen counter with her keys. All fall the pile of fruit has gradually diminished with the ritual of her after-dinner peeling and paring. When she finished them a few weeks ago, Abba drove to Chinatown and bought her a whole wooden crate of them, each orange globe separated by Styrofoam paper. Ima claims they don't taste the same. The Chinese persimmon wither on her desk into shriveled orbs.

Ima sings, "*I once was lost but now I'm found.*" She pauses, her eyes still closed, her voice hovering over the last sound.

"Ima?" Neshama asks.

She jumps. "You scared me."

"Oh sorry."

"It's okay. I was looking for the right word. It helps if I sing."

"A Christian song?"

"I've just always liked that one."

Neshama stares at Ima a second and then shrugs. "I wanted to show you this." Neshama passes Ima her university applications, hovering in the doorway. I sit under the window on the purple and pink needlepoint footstool from Bubbie Rosa's.

Ima skims the papers, mouthing Neshama's name, birth date, academic credentials.

"You're really applying for business?"

Neshama nods.

Ima pauses and then swivels around in her chair, pulls a book from the shelf. "Have I ever showed you this?" She holds an old *Chumash* with a faded blue cover and gold lettering.

“Just smell it,” she says opening the yellowed pages. “Abba’s father gave it to me. Smell it.”

She opens the pages and Neshama and I lean our faces into the aged words. I smell decay and mildew, ink and maybe worn hands. “Does it remind you of something?”

Neshama shrugs, stares at Ima.

“Abba’s father said, ‘Chana, you have it because I know you love books.’”

“Not to Abba?” I ask.

“No, to me. Your father loves Torah, words, but not actual books. So Zeydi gave it to me. Here,” Ima holds out the book. “Feel it. It’s just the right size.”

Neshama takes the book.

“Smell it again,” Ima encourages. “It’s the *best* smell.” She steps over to the bookcase to scan the shelves.

“Ima, about the application...”

“You could switch later, if you change your mind. Here,” she pulls out a paperback, a copy of Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen*. “Here look, I loved this novel. It doesn’t smell right, though. I think it’s the vegetable ink.” She inhales into the pages, makes a face.

Neshama takes the Chaim Potok from Ima without smelling it. “I’m not going to change programs or schools or courses. I want to study business.”

Ima takes the novel back from her. “Mergers and acquisitions? Accounting?”

Neshama shrugs, rolls her toes under her foot, cracks her big toe.

Ima sits down at her desk, hugs both books to her chest. She stares at her computer screen a moment and then hands Neshama back the application with some stamps from her desk drawer. “I guess, if this is what you want. You’re old enough to make your own decisions.”

“Thanks,” Neshama says.

“You should show your Abba.”

“Could you, could you just tell him for me?”

Ima pauses a moment, then sighs. “I suppose.”

Neshama leans over and hugs Ima. "You're the best."

Ima hugs her back. "By the way, we'll be having our first guests for *Shabbos* dinner this week."

"Oh." Neshama hovers at the door watching Ima a moment, then plants a quick kiss on her cheek. "Good night."

Ima drops her head forward.

I stand up from my stool and massage her shoulders. "You've been sitting in front of the computer too long."

"Why business?"

"Wasn't Zeydi in business?"

She twists around in her chair to look at me. "Yes, he was in business, but only because he had to. Neshama has the opportunity to be a teacher. What better job could she imagine?"

I drop my hands from Ima's shoulders. "A geologist," I suggest, "healing the earth?"

Ima stares at the computer screen, rolls a persimmon against the desk until the skin breaks, leaving stringy orange flesh in the wood grain. I kiss her on the cheek.

Upstairs Abba knocks on my bedroom door. "Can I come in?" he asks.

"Sure."

"I brought you something from my school library." He holds out a glossy book entitled, *Treasures of Israel*. "Here," he says flipping through the pages, "there's a great picture of Mitzpe Ramon, that crater where Ima found those shells."

"They're actually a fossil called Ammonite."

"Really?"

Abba puts the book down on my desk and we look at the picture together. The crater is vast with layers of yellow and black rock forming steep sides.

"Wow," I say, "that's amazing."

"Israel is a beautiful country."

"Can you imagine that being carved by water?"

Abba shakes his head. He leaves me with the book and I flip through the pages on the crater. Water seared through rock, exposing strata of basalt, limestone, granite and magma.

I close the book and I stare at the poster of Joe McIntyre in the magazine. I ease the centerfold out of the staples and tape it to the wall over my bed beside my whale poster. He looks down at me with his perfect abs, his moody mouth.

Neshama knocks on my open door. "Did you like my magic trick?"

I stare up at Joe. "What are you talking about?"

"Now you see me," she steps behind my closet door, "now you don't. And," she pops back out, "soon you won't see me at all."

I flop down on my bed. "You won't live at home next year?"

"Not if I can help it."

"You'll really need Houdini to get that kind of money."

"We'll see." She flits back down the hall.

Neshama has always loved Houdini and magic tricks. When we were little Bubbie got a new fridge and she kept the box for us to play in. First we made it a time machine. We tacked a paper towel roll covered in tin foil to the side. We'd spin that arm, hop in the box, and arrive in biblical Israel. With towels draped over our heads, we'd wander, pretending to look for an oasis to water the goats. Neshama would complain about the desert heat. More often, we'd go to the future, heaping on as much of Bubbie's jewelry and dresses as our little bodies could carry. Chiffon over satin, lace over taffeta, fake pearls and rhinestone pins. Neshama would prance, ordering me around.

Then she decided the box should be used for magic tricks instead. She took off the silver arm and cut a back door in the box. We hung a curtain over the front and when Neshama waved a tin foil covered wand, I backed out the flap in the back.

One winter afternoon Abba and Ima dropped us off at Bubbie's for a few hours while they went to a *kumzitz*, a sing-a-long. We practiced our magic trick and then wandered upstairs to show it to Bubbie.

"I'll be there in a minute," she called.

In the living room Bubbie had laid out snacks on the coffee table for her bridge group who was coming over later. We weren't supposed to eat at Bubbie's because she didn't keep kosher.

"Look Ellie." Neshama pointed to a shrimp ring. The little pink and white crescents hung over a specially shaped plate with a little well in the middle for dipping sauce. "No scales or fins."

"We shouldn't try it." I said.

She edged closer. "It would worry you if I did?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Because Ima and Abba said not to, or because God said not to?"

"Because God said not to."

Neshama looked at me, lips determined, and grabbed a shrimp. She plunked it into the sauce, swished it around and popped the whole thing into her mouth.

"Is it good?"

She chewed, and I could see it felt rubbery in her mouth, slimy on her tongue. She spit out the brittle tail, part of the chewed up body still attached, into a pink napkin.

"I didn't like that part," she said. She balled the napkin into her pocket. "Aren't you going to try it?"

"You didn't like it."

"So?"

"If it's yucky, then I don't want to taste it."

Neshama glared at me. "I wish," she sputtered, spittle flying in my face, "I wish you'd disappear for real." She stomped back to the basement wiping her hand across her mouth. She broke a law. Now the Messiah would come slower for everyone and it would be her fault.

When Abba and Ima came to pick us up we showed them our disappearing trick. Neshama was decked out in Bubbie's trousseau nightgown, a concoction of pink net, silk and ribbons. Usually I got to wear this, and she wore Zeydi's old top hat since she was the magician and I only the assistant, but when we went back to the basement, she ripped it from my hands.

"I'm going to be a fairy magician." She threw a plastic tiger mask at me. "Here, you be an animal." I backed into the box on my knees, the linoleum cold and hard.

"I will now make Ellisheva Gold, The Tiger, disappear." I peeked from behind the curtain. Neshama wave the wand. "Abracadabra Kalamazoo, *Baruch Ha'shem*." Then she yanked back the curtain. I hadn't moved.

"Ellie!"

I growled and pawed at her ankles. Neshama kicked my hand. "Disappear!" she hissed and yanked the curtain closed. She waved her wand again, and this time I backed out of the box and placed the flap back like I was supposed to.

"Ta da!"

Ima and Abba clapped.

Neshama closed the curtain. "And now she will reappear."

I crawled into the storage room instead.

"Reappear!" Neshama demanded.

I didn't move.

"Ellie?"

I snuck up the stairs, Neshama still calling my name. In the living room I plucked a shrimp from the little round dish and quickly put it in my mouth. It was rubbery, but sweet.

I was also going to make the Messiah come slower, and I knew this was bad, but I understood why God didn't want us to eat shrimp. They tasted so good I wanted to eat the whole plate.

I hear Neshama singing in her bedroom to the radio. In the bathroom I turn on the water. I want to bathe in a pink and white chrome bathroom with shining faucets, not our scratched tub with the spider cracks running through the tiles. The windowsill peels from where the shower scalds the paint. I slide into the delicious heat, the window steaming over, my hair floating on the surface as if anchored by small minnows. My body is sleek, like a seal, a slippery fish. I brush my hands over my breasts, down my belly. If I drew close to Sarah, our bodies would click together like two magnets. Two skins like one. The water washes over my head, swallowing me up. Holding my breath, my hands slide down my flat stomach to the crease between my legs, press, one toe jammed in the faucet catching the drips. I catch my breath, release my hands. Rose star, *Crossaster papposus*.

Purple stars, and mottled stars, leather stars and bat stars - I'm sick of sea stars. I sit up, water running in rivulets down my body, my skin puckered into pruned welts, and pull the drain.

Friday after school Neshama and I help Ima in the kitchen.

"What're we supposed to do when the guests come?" I ask.

Ima looks up from the tray of chicken. "They're just here to celebrate *Shabbat*, to see a traditional dinner."

"How did you find these people?" Neshama spears a tomato with a paring knife.

"It's good to invite strangers for *Shabbos*." Ima rubs oil over raw chicken breasts.

"Yes, but who are they?" I sprinkle oregano over a dish of potatoes.

"They're students from Shalom House on campus. Mr. Mordecai who coordinates it says they don't really know anything about being Jewish. He finds people who want to come and learn, and then he calls me and asks me how many I can seat."

"We're *seats*?" Neshama asks.

Ima ignores her. "Oh Ellie, I almost forgot, there's a phone message for you on the counter there." She points a greasy finger at the pad of paper by the telephone. "Somebody named Mrs. McCullen called. Do you know who that is?"

I freeze, my eyes opening wide. Ima stirs the meatballs, her back toward me. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"No. You better go call her before *Shabbos*."

I try to casually walk over to the pad of paper by the phone. I lean forward and let my hair hang in front of my face. Sarah never returned my calls and I stopped dropping by her school.

I dial the number in Ima and Abba's office. The phone rings once before Sarah's mom picks up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Ellie Gold. I'm a friend of Sarah's from the cottage."

"Oh, right, hi Ellie. I called to see if you've seen Sarah."

"Uh no." I slither my fingers through the coiled phone cord.

"She was supposed to go to her dad's, but she never showed up."

"I haven't seen her."

"She didn't call and say where she was or anything?"

"No, I haven't spoken with her in months."

"Oh, well if you hear from her."

"Sure."

"Okay, thanks."

"Wait, Mrs. McMullen?"

"Yes?"

"Can you have her call me?"

"Oh sure, dear. I'll tell her."

I hang up the phone and sit at Ima's desk, swivel back and forth in the chair.

"Who was that?" Ima leans in the doorway.

"Just a friend from the summer. Her mom was wondering if I'd seen her."

"You should go and shower now."

"Cute boy by the bookshelf."

An hour later Neshama and I stand in the kitchen peering through the crack in the swinging door to the dining room. "I think he said pre-law," she adds.

"Hmm." I peek through the crack. "Nice eyes. Not much hair."

"You think?"

I turn and reach into the fridge and pull out the salads, peel plastic wrap off the glass dishes. "Definitely," I murmur. "Are you gonna talk to him?"

"No thanks. Abba'd have me married off in six months."

"That's what Becca wants, to get married."

"Yuck."

I peer back through the crack. One of the women has auburn hair, a smooth pageboy. Her fitted black skirt shows off the tight curve of her bum.

Abba sticks his head into the kitchen. "Girls, are you ready?"

We grab the dishes of baba ganoush and hummous and squeeze into the dining room edging past the chairs.

Neshama's part is crooked and she's not wearing any makeup. My own hair is damp and stringy, but Ima sparkles. Her white blouse with the lace collar is crisp, her hair perfectly

combed, her hands steady. Ima's limbs contract with new energy and then straighten out taut. I feel her enter a room like a slingshot, pulling herself tight, then exploding.

The guests stand awkwardly in our tiny dining room, the buffet cleared of clutter, the tablecloth crisp. They watch silently as Ima leads us in *Shalom Aleichem*, and then blesses the candles. Abba raises his cup of wine, blesses it, and then holds up the two braided loaves, shiny with egg yolk and poppy seeds. "We have two *challot* to represent the double portion of manna that fell from the sky on Shabbos when the Jews wandered in the desert." He blesses the loaves and then rips the warm, fleshy bread into chunks, sprinkles on salt and passes them around.

Ima glows, as if it's common for us to have a table of visitors witnessing our Shabbos dinner. Neshama and I keep our faces down until we busy ourselves serving soup.

"Chana," Abba says, "is writing a book that may interest you young people." Neshama and I look up from our soup. We have heard tidbits of the book, but Ima has been reluctant to let us read sections on our own.

Ima puts down her spoon, colours a bit. "It's about why Orthodox marriages are so successful."

"Did you know," Abba adds, "the Orthodox rate of divorce is practically zero?"

"Really?" Emily, the girl with the smooth pageboy, asks. She runs her hand through her thick, shiny hair.

"Wow," another guest murmurs.

Neshama grips my hand under the table. I squeeze back, but my eyes travel across the open neck of Emily's blouse.

Ima places her hands flat on the table, sits up straighter. "It's because Orthodox marriages are set up."

"You mean, like they're arranged?" Emily asks.

"No, not arranged, couples are just introduced. They still make their own choice, it's a much safer system."

“Safer?” Emily repeats.

“Well, think about what happens when you date in the secular world.” Ima leans her elbows on the table. I force myself to focus on Ima and not on Emily's curved eyebrows. “You meet a guy at school and fall in love. You think you have so much in common. You both like the same books, same movies.” The guests listen intently, their eyes focused on Ima. “When you graduate, one of you decides to settle down and find a steady job, start a family. However, the other person wants a job that requires lots of travel, wants to see the world, maybe go to all those romantic places they read about and saw in the movies. Casablanca, Paris.”

When Neshama and I were little, Ima would take us to repertory theatres to see old movies when Abba was out of town. The three of us would settle in the theaters to watch the black and whites, the tension melting from Ima's mouth and shoulders. “*Trafe* movies,” Abba would call them “where they kiss and touch before they marry.”

She continues, “Every time you break up with someone, it becomes harder and harder to tear down the barriers to intimacy and trust. Each time a person is hurt by someone they love, it becomes more difficult to love again.”

Emily nods her head. A few other students exchange uncomfortable glances or gaze at their plates. Neshama rolls her eyes. I watch Ima carefully. I have just heard snippets of the book, repetitive awkward sentences I hope she will smooth out. I've seen the way her ideas boil up through her head, the angles of her clunky sentences on paper. Now I hear the down-to-earth sentiment of her words in our crowded dining room. How well do I know Sarah? I know she goes to Havergal, has no siblings. I know she likes soccer and canoeing. She wants to be a stripper. She wants to disappear.

What I really know of Sarah is the taste of her mouth, and the feel of her skin. I tug at the back of my hair.

Ima leans forward, her hands clasped in front of her. “It used to be people got married younger, as soon as they were sexually mature. ‘Dating’ was to get married. People don't do

that anymore. Now you go on a date, you think you like the guy, so maybe you see him again. You get caught in a relationship with someone with different expectations and goals. In the Orthodox world, when you are ready to get married, you are set up with someone and you only get romantically involved after you *know* the person.” She beams at Emily.

Expectation and goals, I don’t know if Sarah even has any.

The guests listen politely, elbows on the table, a few with skepticism registering in their eyes.

Neshama rolls her eyes again, kicks me under the table.

Abba and Ima engage the guests in small talk, and Neshama and I clear the table.

“The reason the divorce rate is so low,” Neshama hisses at me in the kitchen, “is that divorce isn’t allowed.”

Mrs. Bachner’s daughter crawled home from New York with her five children and her black eye.

We serve dessert and Ima pours tea. “So how do people get married then?” Emily asks.

“Well, when a young woman or man is ready to get married, and when their teacher or parent feels they are mature enough for the responsibility, they approach a go-between who sets up a date with another eligible young Jewish person. This young couple goes on a date, but they have to meet in a public place, like a hotel lobby, where other people are present. The couple is not allowed to meet in private until after the marriage.” Murmuring breaks out around the table.

“Yes, I know, shocking. There’s a very good reason for this. The young couple must not ever touch, not even hold hands before their marriage.”

Ima smiles as the murmuring breaks into outright disbelief. “We all know,” she continues, “that holding hands leads to further physical intimacy. Once you’ve started a physical relationship, it’s difficult to objectively decide if someone is the best person for you.”

“Yes,” Abba adds. “When you are involved with someone physically, the sexual side of a relationship starts to colour all your thinking.”

I cringe at the sound of the word 'sex' coming out of Abba's mouth. Gross.

"You want to marry someone who has the same goals and aspirations, who has the same values, who wants to live the same kind of lifestyle as you. If you fall in love with the outside of someone, you might not see them for who they really are."

I stare at my hands in my lap.

Ima leans back in her chair, surveys her guests. They listen intently, eyes focused.

"Let's go back to our young couple in the hotel lobby. They meet and introduce themselves and they talk about their families and their jobs, their likes and dislikes, and then they talk some more. Sometimes these dates last hours. If the couple are both in agreement to see each other again, the go-between sets up another meeting.

"When I first became religiously observant I was invited to a wedding. I remember watching the bride walk down the aisle and thinking, she has never even touched the hand of the man she is going to marry! I thought it was awful, but when it was my turn, I was so in love with my *b'shert*, my one beloved, I just thought how wonderful it would be to be hold his hand once we were *kallah v'chatan*, bride and groom."

I watch Ima smile at Abba, her shoulders relaxed, her hands loose on the table. That's it. I'm going to change. I want to meet a perfect stranger, talk to them about the ocean, about *Hashem* and lighting candles. My name is Ellie Gold, I'd say, and I love the sea.

Ima leads us in *zemirot* about the beauty of Shabbat and God, and His commandments and even though I am tired, my exhaustion melts away as I join in the singing, softly harmonizing with Ima.

Neshama and I clear the table. "One man?" Neshama hisses, "Could you imagine only ever sleeping with one man?"

I nod, and scrape plates into the garbage can.

"Wouldn't you want to test drive your spouse before you marry him? I mean, what if he's a horrible slob? What if the sex is terrible?"

"One spouse would be enough, I think. If it's your *b'shert*."

Neshama snorts, "You don't really believe that, do you? Ima wants people to get married, reproduce, follow laws God doesn't care about, and that's it. That's not a way to live, that's... that's imprisonment. Not even Ima and Abba lived that way. They had a life, *then* they got married."

"Um, I guess so." I return to the table for more plates.

"I wasn't always religious," Ima tells the guests, "I wasn't always happy either." I clear teacups and dessert plates from the table. "I needed a way to live," she says, "something that made sense." Ima smiles, eyes steady, mouth warm. From the kitchen I hear her singing *Tsur Mishelo*, her voice rising sweet and forceful, the neat lines of her life in place.

I'm Ellic Gold and I love the sea, but I've already pressed my hands against Sarah's jean clad hip, let our lips brush. My fingers climb through my hair, twist strands around my pinky and then pull. Hair coils around my fingers. I nudge the clump into the garbage with the chicken bones and greasy napkins. Slender-rayed Star, *Evasterias troschelii*.

Chapter 7

"So I hear your mother's out to convert the masses." Bubbie leans on the counter and pours Neshama and me tall glasses of orange juice.

"Only the chosen Jewish masses," Neshama points out.

I sit on a stool and stare out at the bleak November sky. A light rain drizzles over the barren trees.

"What's her plan of attack?"

"Arranged marriages."

"Aye-yah-yie," Bubbie sighs. "Unbelievable. And you, what do you think?" She taps my arm.

"Huh?"

"Your mom's dinners, how are you holding up?"

"Well, it's a little like being an unpaid caterer."

Bubbie pats my shoulder. "You just stay here and relax."

"Do you mind if we watch TV?" Neshama asks.

"Go right ahead. I taped *Day of Our Lives* for you. Do you want me to turn it on?"

Neshama slides off her stool. "No, that's okay. I don't keep Shabbos anymore."

"Oh, how interesting, and you?" Bubbie looks at me.

"She follows party line," Neshama says.

"How come you're so quiet?" Bubbie asks me.

"I dunno. Just tired."

She strokes my hair. "Go, watch TV. I have to run to the store."

Bubbie's TV room is down a short flight of stairs off her kitchen. Huge windows overlook a sea of leaves, scarlet and yellow, crisp and curly on the lawn. I sink into one of the deep white leather couches and curl up under an afghan.

In two months of trying to change I now know the Latin names for thirty different kinds of sea stars, and their attributes. I can do twenty pushups without stopping and three sets of forty sit-ups. I started memorizing countries of the world *and* their capitals, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, but I'm not changing. In the middle of a psalm I'm thinking about Sarah's sassy way of talking. Halfway through the periodic table I'm wondering if she'll call. When I recite countries I'm imagining her calves by the time I get to Armenia. By Belize my hands are sliding up her knees, Bhutan her thighs, and by Brazil it's all over. I've even started to enjoy pulling out my hair. I imagine Sarah's hands tugging, pulling me closer to her, her lips coming to kiss me again, her hands urgent and twisting in my hair. A tingle runs from the base of my skull all the way down my back to my bum.

I've done some research on gay people at the library and being gay doesn't sound too good. Besides being an abomination according to Jewish law, all the famous gay people I've read about have had tragic ends, or at least disappointing sex lives. Virginia Woolf committed suicide, Frederick the Great's young male lovers were beheaded and Tchaikovsky got married but left his bride after a month in a state of nervous collapse.

Meanwhile, Sarah hasn't returned my calls, not even the polite one I left with her mother that time I talked with her. She can't be out of town and it's unlikely she's too busy. Although I've stopped by her school a zillion times, I've never run into her again. I was just her summer fling. An experiment in girl kissing, to be discarded by the Fall, forgotten in the approaching doom of winter. Someone to make fun of - poor, religious Ellie. Taunt and tease and then shed.

Neshama flips between channels, news, sports, a laugh track. "Hey, a nature show. Just your stuff."

I look up and then bury my face back in my hands.

Neshama gasps. "What did you do to your hair?"

"What?" I flip up my head.

"You have a huge bald spot."

My hand reaches up to the back of my neck.

"Let me see." Neshama pushes my hand away. She traces her fingers over the bare waxy patch on my nape.

"It's nothing." I pull away from her.

Neshama flops back on the couch. "What's with you? You're starting to act like Ima." She stuffs a handful of popcorn in her mouth.

On the TV dolphins hurtle their sleek bodies over the surface of the water. Behind them seagulls dive and soar against the sunlit sea. "I'm not like Ima, I just..."

"What?"

I sit up and examine Neshama's face. "You really want to know?"

Neshama nods, glancing back at the TV.

I squint at her. "You promise to listen?"

She nods again.

"You won't tell?"

She turns to me, "Ellie!"

"Okay." I turn sideways on the couch, resting my cheek on the slippery smooth leather.

"Well, I met this," I swallow, "this guy at the cottage that I ... kinda like and now he won't talk to me-"

"What?" Neshama bolts upright, her eyebrows shooting up her forehead.

I flex my legs nervously. "I told you, there was this guy-"

"You said you had a friend, a girl."

Oh God. I squeeze my legs tighter. "I, I lied. He's a guy."

"Wait, you had a boyfriend?" Neshama slides off the couch onto the beige carpet towards me.

"Yes."

"And he wasn't Jewish?" She stares, mouth open.

"You promised to listen-"

"I'm sorry. And?"

"He won't talk to me."

Neshama crawls over to me, smiling. She leans her head next to mine. "Did you kiss, with your tongue?"

"Ness!"

"Well?"

I sigh, "Yes."

Neshama's hands drop to her sides. She stares out the window. "While I was at summer camp, you were... What's he like?"

I roll over on my back and stare at the ceiling. "Well, he's tall and a good swimmer and he taught me how to paddle-"

"Ok, but what was he *like*? Talkative, quiet?" She climbs onto the couch next to me, propping her chin in her hand.

"Well, she, I mean he..." I freeze.

Neshama narrows her eyes.

"He has great arms," I say quickly, "and really nice... skin. He... he likes to play games, tease me. He's very athletic."

She stares at me for a long moment. My heart pounds. Behind her the dolphins dive into the sea. "Did Bubbie meet him?"

"Um... well, no she didn't. She didn't ever meet him. Don't say anything to Bubbie please. He... look, I just don't want-"

"I promise--"

"-Because he won't talk, and it's over anyway." I ram my hands tight under my back to stop their fidgeting.

"You had a boyfriend," Neshama says. "One question, okay?"

I hold my breath, nod.

"Would he be worth it?"

I exhale. "Whaddya mean?"

"Well, if he's not Jewish... Ima and Abba would... He'd only be worth it if he was the most amazing, most perfect, most beautiful, sexiest, nicest guy in the world."

"Ah-huh."

"Was he the most amazing guy ever?"

I think of Sarah licking the wine glass, her tongue quivering over the rim, her eyes taunting me. "No," I whisper.

"Then, just leave it alone." She sits back on the couch and flips channels. "So, is he a good kisser?"

"Neshama!"

"I'm just asking."

"Just stop it. Okay?"

"Okay, I'm sorry."

I can feel her staring at me. I turn away and gaze out the window. A breeze ripples through the leaves, sending them upright and flitting across the lawn. "Ima is right about hand holding."

"Pardon?"

"Hand holding. It clouds your mind."

"Lust," Neshama pushes the *Days of Our Lives* cassette into the video machine. "Yes, clouds the mind."

I take out my Earth Science textbook and try to read. I feel Neshama staring at me. I glance at her. "What?"

"Nothing." She looks away.

As the days grow shorter and *Shabbos* starts earlier, we take our preparations to new heights to be ready on time. The guest's faces blur into a series of glasses and dark hair. Thursday nights Neshama and I vacuum and set the table and on Friday morning before school we chop vegetables and start soup. After school we scrub toilets, bake chicken. Neshama tapes the light switches to "on," and I tear toilet paper. Emily, the student from our first dinner, comes early to help prepare and talk to Ima.

"Ellie," Neshama whispers from the door of the downstairs bathroom.

I put down the toilet scrubber, "Shh."

"What?"

"I'm trying to listen." I jerk my head in the direction of the kitchen.

Neshama leans against the doorjamb, dismisses the thought of Emily with a wave of her hand. "Same old sob story. Divorced parents, lack of spirituality in their Judaism, you know, announcing page numbers in English at the 'temple.' All rise for The *Barchu* on page blah blah."

I stick my head out in the hall past Neshama. "She was just getting to the good part, the big confession."

"About how her dad left her mom and sob sob, they had to sell the Jag?" She parks herself on the toilet seat cover. "And, oh right, about how her boyfriend doesn't want to get married. Big surprise. Who gets married before thirty anyway?"

"Religious kids."

"It was a rhetorical question."

"Can you move?" I poke Neshama with the butt end of the toilet scrubber.

She gets off the cover. "They're all experimenters, ex-Buddhists, taking courses on 'maximizing their inner potential,' supposed 'victims' of consumerism and Western excess. Re-born Jews are *so* lost. Look at Ima," she whispers. She closes the door, squishing us together in the tiny bathroom. "But I've got a plan."

"For what?"

"Shhhh. Counter-attack."

I flush the toilet and start tearing toilet paper into strips. "Attacking what?"

"The brain washing these poor people are going through. 'Don't date, marry strangers you've never touched before, all that god stuff, please!'"

"Yeah, so, what're you gonna do?"

Neshama grins mischievously. "We'll fill their pockets with notes, true *Torah*."

"What notes?"

She digs in her skirt and spreads out small scraps of paper on the toilet cover.

Embrace human rights, not Torah obligations! The Bible allows slavery. Do you?

Support equality, not superiority! Jews believe they are The Chosen People. Do you want to be part of a group that believes they're better than others?

Freedom of choice, not oppression! The Bible considers homosexuality a sin worthy of death. Do you want to be associated with a religion that denies people their sexual freedom?

I draw in a sharp breath, my shoulders contracting. I look up at Neshama. "Wow."

"Are you in?"

I hesitate. My heart beats in my chest, my hand throbbing around the toilet paper roll.

"Why did you write this one?" I hold up the note about homosexuality.

Neshama shrugs and focuses on pushing back the cuticle on her pinkie. "I dunno know. I was just thinking about all the ways Orthodox Judaism can be, you know, oppressive."

"Oh."

The doorbell rings and she puts the notes away. "We'll stick them in their coat pockets while they're eating dessert."

"Okay."

Neshama closes the door behind her leaving me in the tiny bathroom. I lay my head on the toilet seat cover, my breath audible in the small space. From the kitchen I hear Ima singing,

"Eishet hayil mi yimsa, v'rahak mipeninim micrah?

Oh who can find a brave wife, who has no price, not even rubies?"

After dinner Emily helps us clear the table. She turns on the tap in the kitchen and starts washing dishes. I keep glancing at the low neckline of her burgundy sweater, the hint of cleavage.

"You don't have to do that," Neshama says.

"I don't mind."

"I mean, our father decided last year that we couldn't wash dishes on Friday nights anymore."

"Oh, is that because it's a holiday and you're not supposed to work?"

Neshama frowns. "Yeah, but it's more work Saturday night."

I take the plates from Emily and put them in the bucket of water by the back door. "We soak them." I say.

"We're not supposed to run the Garburator anymore either." Neshama flicks the switch, the loud rumble of the motor filling the kitchen.

"You're not supposed to use electricity," I explain. Emily stares, mouth open at Neshama.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Just sit." Neshama holds the door to the dining room open for her.

Back at the dinner table Ima passes the fruit salad and Abba pours tea. "What," he asks the guests, "do you think is the greatest problem in modern Judaism?"

Neshama and I exchange glances.

"The Middle-East peace conflict." Emily states. Her long lashes flash over deep brown eyes.

"Intermarriage?"

"Anti-Semitism?"

Abba plants his fist on the table. "Those are all valid, but truly the greatest problem in my mind is," he pauses, "not enough people are waiting for *Moshiach*."

I don't dare look at Neshama. I'm not sure whether we'd roll our eyes, or merely giggle.

"But surely, you don't mean..." Emily starts.

"The Messiah?"

When Neshama and I were younger The Messiah, *Moshiach*, was a source of endless wonder and amusement. *Moshiach* was supposed to ride in on his ass and this always made Neshama and I giggle. How does one ride on their ass, and isn't ass a bad word?

Abba used to tell us that when *Moshiach* comes, all the bones in the valley of the dead would rise and there would be peace throughout the land. The lamb would lie down with the lion, and we would beat our swords into ploughshares and not make war anymore.

What to do with a ploughshare in Toronto? There weren't any lions or lambs in the city either.

Besides, I wanted the bones of the dead to stay in the ground. I imagined them gory and brittle, sailing through the sky. Neshama touched a tombstone at Frieda Cohen's funeral and it fell over and we ran and hid in the car. I briefly wondered if it would make *Moshiach* come, if all the bones would be let out easier. I thought the graveyard was the valley of the dead. Ima said no, it was bigger.

The cemetery on Yonge was much bigger, but Ima said that wasn't it either.

Bubbe once mentioned she wanted to be cremated, but Abba said that's how the Nazis did it, and everyone stopped talking.

Abba leans back and taps his fork on the table. "Only when the Messiah comes, will all the other problems stop. Not only will the lamb lie down with the lion, not only will we beat our swords into ploughshares, but there will be no intermarriage, or Middle-East conflict. There will just be peace." He pauses, looking around the table. "We can help bring the Messiah by following the word of God as outlined in the Torah, and as interpreted by our revered rabbis." He looks purposely at Neshama. She stares back without blinking.

There is a moment of silence, the guests either staring at Abba, or looking uncomfortably down at their hands. Emily chews her lip.

Ima smiles, "How about some *zemirot*?" She stands up to get the *benchers*. Neshama excuses herself from the table. I linger another awkward moment and then get up to refill the teapot. From the kitchen I peer down the hallway and watch Neshama shoving notes in the guests' pockets, mumbling, "crap, crap, crap," under her breath.

"That's it," she whispers to me in the kitchen. "Did you know Houdini was a rabbi's son?"

"Hold still," Neshama says.

I sit on the mauve toilet seat cover in the upstairs bathroom. "How many more?"

"About ten." Neshama pulls the skin between my eyebrows taut and yanks out an unruly eyebrow hair.

"Ow! That's enough."

"Ellie, you can't walk around with a monobrow." She tips my chin up and pinches another hair in her shiny tweezers.

I sigh and knit my fingers tight.

"Wanna know what I'm going to ask in Q and A this week?" Her breath is warm on my cheek.

"Sure."

Neshama has gotten up almost every week to ask a question about the *Torah* since the term began. Last week she marched up to the podium and said, "I would like to know why there are certain parts of the *Torah* that we follow and others that we deem out of date. For example," she flipped through her notebook, one hand on her hip, "Exodus 35:2 says people who work on the Sabbath should be put to death." Neshama blinked her big blue eyes. "What am I supposed to do about my neighbours? I mean, they aren't observant."

Last month she asked about Leviticus 21:7. "It says it is permissible to sell your daughter into slavery. Is this equivalent to arranged marriages in modern society?"

Neshama yanks out another hair, this time below my eyebrows. "You know the note I wrote, the one about how the *Torah* says homosexuality is a sin?"

"Y-e-a-h." I grit my teeth, my fingernails digging into my knuckles.

"Wouldn't that be great to ask in Q and A?"

I jerk away from her. "You wouldn't."

"I might. Why would you care?"

"Because... because..." My mind reels. "Think how embarrassing that would be. You want to ask Rabbi Lowenstein a question about sex? And what if..."

"What if what?"

"If someone really was, you know." I stand by the mirror and look at the red patch of skin between my groomed eyebrows.

"So then they'd know."

"That they were an abomination?"

"No, how stupid the *Torah* is."

"But they'd be so embarrassed."

"No one would know it was them."

I pause, gripping the counter. "You won't ask will you?"

"I'm not sure."

"But it's tomorrow."

"So, I'll think about it." Neshama rinses the tweezers in the sink.

"Ask in private, or wait until Mrs. Lowenstein comes." I run my fingers over the bald spot at the back of my head. New fine hairs have sprouted.

"Ellie, this is about education and power." She smooths on lip gloss. "Just imagine Rabbi Lowenstein trying to answer."

I sigh, "He's going to say what he's always says when you ask about human rights. The Torah isn't about freedom, it's about obligation. Obligation to get married to men, to people the land of Israel, make more Jews. That's it." I put my hand on Neshama's shoulder. "Please don't ask. It'll be inappropriate."

Neshama smacks my hand off her shoulder. "Inappropriate? Who cares?" She stares at me, her eyes hard. "It's the fight. It's about saying these things in public, that the Torah is discriminatory." She stares at me a moment longer then slams the bathroom door behind her.

I slip to the floor, wedging myself between the toilet and the tub. I will turn bright red if she asks. I will explode with shame and anger right there in the *beit hamidrash*. And everyone will know why, like a light from the heavens illuminating me, they will know I'm a girl kisser. They'll kick me out of school or worse, I'll have to stay and no one will talk to me. They'll hiss "abomination" when I walk by, and I'll have to wear a pink triangle on my chest. Everyone will get married except me, and every Yom Kippur I will ask for forgiveness and pray to change, but I never will. Ima and Abba will ask me to move away where no one knows us, and I'll have to pretend not to be Jewish anymore. Either that or I'll have to lie and get married to some man. I shudder. And not even that will work out and I'll be divorced and alone, and still, I won't ever get to see Sarah again. At least she gets to go to a school where they wear short kilts.

I burst out of the bathroom, grab my school bag and run to my night class, heart pumping, legs churning. In the field I slump against a tree. The air is cold, the earth barren and brown. The leaves have decomposed into wet mulch laced with frost.

In class we watch a video about plate tectonics. I lean back in my chair and wish a volcano would magically sprout right in the middle of Toronto, a black cone erupting at Yonge and Eglinton. It would break through the asphalt, uprooting electrical poles, long shoots of lava flowing through the subway, reaching all the way out to Scarborough. The volcano would rumble below the earth's crust, then hot lava, slow and viscous like molasses would slowly rise from the magma chamber up the pipe, *glug, glugging* over the lip of the crater. A sea of red fire would roll towards Lake Ontario, engulfing old brick houses, bungalows, century old maples and new minivans. It would flow towards Lawrence to the North, Avenue Road to the East, the bulk flowing West and then veering slightly off kilter to roar down the Don Valley. Whichever way it would go, I'd be swept up in a burning red roar.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Rabbi Lowenstein tucks his hands behind his back and paces at the front of the room. There's a long pause. I hold my breath, rooted to the chair. My arms dangle at my sides, my teeth clamping on my cheek, slowly grinding back and forth until I taste blood. My pulse stampedes through me, pounding at my temples.

No one moves. Neshama sits arms folded over her chest, slouching, legs crossed. I look over but she focuses on the buttons on her blouse.

Rabbi Lowenstein stops pacing. "No questions? Not even Neshama?" He smiles at her. "I like a challenge."

I hold my breath.

Neshama sits up straighter. "Well..."

"Yes?" He pauses in front of her.

Neshama quickly glances my way, then back at Reb Lowenstein. "I didn't prepare anything for this week."

I exhale a huge breath, relaxing back into my seat.

"Oh, well. Maybe you'll find something for us to think about for next week." He turns to the class. "Please take out your *Chumash*. This week's *parsha* is *Vayeshev*."

Neshama gets out her book with the other girls, languidly flipping through the pages. I gaze out at the grey sky and suck the iron-tasting blood off my cheek. My head tilts back, a wave of relief rolling over me.

I wait for Neshama on the front stairs after class. We fall into step walking down Bathurst. "Why didn't you ask any questions?"

"I was planning to."

"But?"

She zips up her jacket. "I started thinking about it, you know, what the *Torah* says about gay people."

"And?"

"Well, it seems so stupid. Gay people can't help being who they are, and yet they're considered abominations. And so I asked Mrs. Lowenstein—"

"You did?"

"A-huh, and you won't believe the crap she told me. She said people could change. Can you believe that? So I started thinking, why do I even care what the *Torah* says? And I decided I'm not wasting my time with it anymore. Rabbi Lowenstein is super nice and he even has good answers to some of my questions, but it's just a racist, outdated book. I mean, think about the whole Chosen People thing."

"Wait, go back to the part about, you know, the gay people." We stop at the intersection at Lawrence Avenue.

"What about them?" Neshama jams her hands into her pockets.

"You really think they can't change?"

Neshama flaps her arms against her coat. "As much as you can stop being male or female. Imagine trying to be a guy. Or imagine trying to like girls. The Torah says gay people are wrong, and they're all sinners. That makes no sense. I say, go be gay and screw the Torah. Screw it all."

"All of it?"

"Yeah, the whole thing. I'm so sick of a mean God who insists on stupid stuff like only eating animals with split hooves. How does that make you a better person? I can't believe how many generations of crazy men believe all that crap. They only do it to oppress women. Garberators are work? Who does the cooking in all those crazy ways on *Shabbos*? Why would you believe any of it?"

"I... I... I don't know. Because *Shabbos* is good," I say weakly.

"So rest on *Shabbos*, but don't follow stupid rules on how to rest. It's just a book, El."

"A book inspired by God," I whisper.

Neshama scoffs. "Can you even prove that God exists? Can you?"

When I pray, the words reverberate through my chest and esophagus filling my head. They ground me, like bull kelp thick and bulbous rooted to the ocean floor, yet still moving, undulating in the waves. How to explain this to Neshama?

"Anyway," Neshama says, "I only have eight more months to go of this, this charade."

"And then?"

"I'm done. With school, the skirts, the hand washing - all of it."

The wind starts to pick up. I pull my hood over my toque. We turn onto a side street.

"Neshama, can I ask you a question?"

"Yeah?"

I hesitate, "How are you going to live?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"Well, what will you do Friday nights?"

"What won't I do? Go out with friends, see movies, go dancing."

"You mean live like Bubbie?" I cringe.

"Yeah. You did it for a summer, you survived." Neshama arches one eyebrow.

I lick my lips. "That was different," I say quietly.

Neshama laughs, "I bet."

I turn away without answering. I want to ask how she'll feel if she doesn't wake up each morning with *Hashem* on her lips, but I know she'll just laugh.

All through dinner a silent rage courses through me. Judaism says I am an abomination, yet God and His commandments are supposed to be good. Mrs. Lowenstein says I can change, but I've tried and it didn't work. Neshama says God is just an idea made up by stupid men who say women can't love other women. I pause, what's God anyway? Some big guy in the sky? The creator? Creator of what? I know the dinosaur bones are older than the *Torah*.

Ima starts singing a *zemirot*, the guests joining in. I open my mouth to join in but the words stick in my throat, choking me. When I push the sounds past the lump and out my dry mouth, I sound off key. I stop singing and look down at my hands.

If I'm not part of this religion, who am I anyway? Just Ellie Gold, whoever that is.

Monday morning in the *beit midrash* I stand with the other girls, sleepy and grumpy to chant the morning prayers. The sky is dark and heavy, the fluorescent lights glaring over the tables. I let my gaze wander out the window to the grey street.

The girls chant, "*Praised are you, Lord our God, King of the universe who made me in His image.*" Except I'm not in His image, not in the nicey-nice boy-likes-girl way. If I am in your image, are you gay God, are you?

"Praised are you God who made me a Jew," the girls chant.

Yeah, thanks a lot. What a sick joke, if I wasn't Jewish maybe I could just happily like girls.

"Praised are you God who gives sight to the blind. Praised are you who clothes the naked." Does He? Not that I can see.

"Thanks for making me a sinner by nature," I chant in my head to the same sing-song tune the girls use. "Thanks for making me an outcast by design."

I slam my book shut. All around me the girls continue mumbling through the prayers. What good is God anyway, and what good are His stupid exclusive rules? Heat rises up my cheeks and my temples throb. When everyone rises for the *Barchu*, I slip out to the bathroom.

In *Mishna* class I stare at the wall, drumming my thumbs on the table.

"Ellie?" Jill, my study partner asks.

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just not into this," I gesture to the book in front of us. "I don't really care what you should or shouldn't do if you're riding a camel and it's time to pray."

"But it's the *Mishna*," she whispers.

"I don't care." I cross my arms.

"What's with you?"

"Nothing." I say too loudly. Esther and Becca look over from a table nearby.

She sucks in her breath. "Do you want to study alone?"

I sigh, "Yeah maybe."

I slip out of the room when no one is looking and head for the bathroom. In the stall I lean my head against the cold tile wall, press my fingers against my temples.

The bathroom door swings open. "Ellie?" Becca asks.

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong?"

I don't say anything.

"Can I come in?"

I unlatch the door and sniffle back some tears. "I just don't feel well. Cramps."

Becca eyes me. "That's not it, is it."

I stare down at the floor. "I'm okay, really."

She strokes my arm. "Are you, are you in trouble?"

"No. I'm fine really."

"If you need to talk, I'm ready to listen."

"Thanks."

She reaches up and hugs me. "Maybe if you pray really hard, *Hashem* will help you."

During the *mincha* prayers before lunch I concentrate on a particularly vicious hangnail.

In the cafeteria I skip the washing of the hands and start eating without even saying a blessing.

No one notices.

After school I consider sneaking out and trying a ham sandwich or bacon, or even just some non-kosher beef jerky, even a few gelatin-laden gummy bears. My stomach twists at the thought of *trafe* food. I just go home.

When I get into bed at night, my shoulders knotted into lumps, the *shma* rises in my head automatically as I pull up the covers, fluff my pillow.

Shma yisroel adonai eloheimu.

Hear o Israel: the Lord our God.

God sucks, I think, and I stop chanting. Instead I murmur, "Yea nature. Praise the trees.

Preserve our oceans and lakes." It's not the same.

Winter

Chapter 8

Ima's eyes grow wide and alert when the visiting cantor begins singing *Eishet Hayil*.

"Eishet hayil mi yimsa, v'rahak mipeninim micrah?"

Oh, who can find a brave wife, one whose price is above rubies?"

The cantor's voice resonates through the shul.

Ima sits on the edge of her seat and smooths her blue suit with the braid-trimmed lapels.

"I love this song," she whispers to me. I smile back. We're sitting in the middle of the women's section, Neshama and I on either side of Ima. The children's choir has sung some Hanukah songs, we've lit the menorah, and in a few minutes we'll eat potato *latkas* with applesauce and sour cream and jam-filled donuts in the synagogue basement. The rich greasy smell wafts up, making my tummy rumble.

I've been a non-believer for a whole month now. A whole month without praising God, except for the times when I accidentally start to mumble the prayers out of habit. Since I don't even believe in God anymore, the prayers don't count. I still keep *Shabbos* and all that because I don't want Ima or Abba to get suspicious. When they're not looking I flick the lights on and off a few times, just to prove I don't care.

Ima starts to hum next to me. She plants her velvety pumps firmly on the floor and squeezes my hand. Neshama and I exchange glances as Ima sits up straighter, starts to sing. Don't do it Ima, I think, but I don't want to stop her either. *"Eishet hayil mi yimsa."* Her voice courses through me raw and pure, rising in volume, until she drops my hand, her eyes closing, head tilting back. She stands, stomach pushing out, shoulders back, eyes bright, too shiny. Her face is dreamy, the tension draining from her temples and tight jaw. She stands unaware, the lines of her face softening, the brim of her hat shading her closed eyes.

Neshama and I watch, paralyzed as Ima sings louder and louder on each chorus, her eyes glazed, locked on the cantor's as if she and him were the only two people present, their voices dipping around the melody. Ima's voice is strong, but breathy, a clear, warm soprano. If I listen closely I can hear Bubbie's smoky rasp in Ima's singing.

I sit, hands clenched, on the edge of my seat.

Then Ima takes a huge breath and hits the high note. "*Eishet hayil mi yimsa.*" Her voice soars louder than I've ever heard, the sound more beautiful than I knew she was capable, curling off the ceiling in perfect harmony with the cantor.

The congregation collectively holds its breath, no one moving, just listening to voices, male and female, matched.

The cantor sings more passionately, neck cords straining.

I imagine old men downstairs sighing and remembering their wives when they were young, beckoning to them with their hair uncovered, limbs soft and supple. Unmarried men blush and mumble corrections to their straying thoughts to think of *Hashem* and not *Kol Isha*, the voice of a woman.

Tears trickle down old Mrs. Zissler's wrinkled cheeks into the wool collar of her suit.

Children stop playing in the aisles and look, eyes wide, mouths gaping.

I hear the beauty of her clear voice, and underneath I feel the pure force of her love for God.

And then the high note fades, the congregation moving, breathing, whispering. I hold still a moment longer, sitting up straight, letting Ima's voice resonate through me.

Mrs. Bachner turns in her seat and glares at Ima.

Over the balcony I see Rabbi Abrams twisting his fingers in his lap. Abba stares up at the women's section, his face contracted into hard lines.

Neshama grabs my hand, "C'mon." She gathers our coats and pulls Ima stumbling toward the exit. Our heels clatter down the stairs.

Abba is already waiting for us outside, soft dry flakes of snow dusting his shoulders.

"I was there," Ima exclaims, pounding her fist against her patent leather purse. We stare at her. "I was there, I was there. I sang and I sang and my voice, it hit the ceiling, but I was there." Ima practically dances down the street. "I was *there*."

I shiver, wind wrapping around my ankles.

Abba drapes Ima's coat around her. "Where else would you have been?"

"Oh, Avram you don't understand." Ima paces on the pavement. "The note, the words, all reached, I... well after I finished singing I was still in the room."

"Where else would you have been?" he asks again. He buttons up his coat, his shoulders stiff, hands rigid.

"I don't know," Ima swings her arms down. "Just not present. I've only had that once before."

"Where was that?" I ask.

"Oh," she mumbles, "it was when I was at the convent in Carmel. I was singing," Ima starts talking faster. "I was singing and singing and it was Ave Maria and I hit this high note I could never get before, and my voice just rose, but it was as if I was looking down at myself and I couldn't really remember being there afterwards. I couldn't remember. The nuns said I sat down and stopped singing, but I don't remember that."

"And this time?"

"I hit the high note and stayed in the room." Ima beams. We gape at her, shivering on the street, coats undone, snow falling in our hair. "Let's go back in and eat," she urges.

Abba takes her arm. "I'll make you *latkas* at home," he says, and guides her down Bathurst.

The next morning Ima shuffles into the kitchen in her slippers and gray robe, her eyes blurry and bagged. "Good morning," she says, her voice hoarse. She pours herself a cup of tea and sits down at the table.

Abba nods, smiles weakly. When I got up this morning he was seated in the kitchen still wearing his shirt from last night, the collar soft and creased. He stared out at the snow accumulating like thick fur over the trees and bushes, his eyes bloodshot, his beard unruly.

I unload the dishwasher, placing the glasses in the cupboard by the sink.

Ima yawns, stretches her arms over her head. "I slept a long time," her voice cracks.

"Yes you did." Abba rubs his eyes.

"My voice," she rasps.

Abba sips his coffee. "You must have overdone it."

She nods, smiling. "I sang."

"Yes." Abba ducks his head. "I'll get you something for your throat." He digs in the pantry for the honey and pulls the lemon juice from the refrigerator. "Add some of that."

Ima stirs her tea. "When I sang," she croaks, "it totally filled my head, you know what I mean? I saw this colour, deep purple, and then it turned bright blue, aqua." She cocks her head, "No, like indigo."

I stop sorting cutlery. Abba and I gaze at her.

Ima presses her hand against her breast. "And the song was pushing against my chest like it had been waiting there for years."

"That's great," Abba mutters into his coffee. He clears his throat. "I was thinking, this Friday for dinner, we'd just have our family."

Ima's smile falls. "No guests?"

"I thought it would be nice to have a rest, you know, be on vacation."

She wraps her hands around the mug, her smile uncertain. "If I work on my book, then I'll have more to say when the students come the following week."

"Yes," Abba says, "a good idea."

Ima picks up her tea and settles herself on the living room couch with her notebook. I stand in the kitchen, watching Abba rub his temples, his head in his hands.

On Monday morning, the first real day of vacation, Neshama is already dressed when I come downstairs. She sits at the table next to Abba, shoveling bran flakes into her mouth.

"Where are you going so early?"

She glares at me. "To the library."

I raise my eyebrows. Abba stares out the window. Neshama puts her bowl in the dishwasher and picks up her backpack. "Bye Abba."

He waves back, sips his coffee.

I follow her to the front hall closet. She pulls on her coat.

"I got a job for the break," she whispers.

"Where?"

"Eaton's Centre, wrapping Christmas gifts."

"You did?"

She nods.

Upstairs Ima sings, "*Lo yisa goy el goy cherev.*" Her voice is still raspy.

"That's going to be a long day at the library."

"You'll cover for me, right?"

I nod.

Ima comes downstairs singing, "*One tin soldier rides away.*" Her voice is a thin scrape.

"Bye Ima."

Ima squints at her. "Oh, have a good day."

Neshama slips out the door.

"Where was she off to?"

"Library."

Ima clears her throat, takes a breath and tries to sing, "*Avinu Malkeinu*." Her voice is deep and hoarse. She coughs and pulls snow pants out of the closet. "I can't believe my throat is still bad." Ima pulls the snow pants on and steps into a pair of boots. "Wanna help me shovel the walk?"

"No thanks."

She zips up her ski jacket and mitts and grabs the shovel. "*Jesus loves me this I know...*" Her voice trickles to a slow hiss of air. She shakes her head.

I spend most of the week with Becca and Esther. We watch videos, work on a school project and try and write a new song for Esther to play on her guitar. I talk them into going down to Toronto Island, but they get side-tracked by the shopping at the harbour. I baby-sit for the neighbour's kids a few afternoons and use the money to buy more fossils from the ROM gift shop. Becca buys me two new fish for Hanukah. We name them Nebachnezzar and Antiochus.

In the evenings after we light the Hanukah candles, Neshama and I go to Mrs. Fidderman's to feed the cat and watch taped videos of *Days Of Our Lives*. We fast forward through the commercials and eat popcorn on Mrs. Fidderman's floral sofa waiting for Bo and Hope to finally reunite.

On Thursday when I come home from a trip to the science centre I make myself a cup of hot chocolate and settle on the living room sofa. Only Abba is home, swiveling back and forth on his office chair. Just as I flip open my ocean encyclopedia, the doorbell rings. I pull myself reluctantly from the deep cushion grip. Through the peep hole I see Rabbi Abrams wrapped in a long black coat on our doorstep. Tension creeps up the back of my neck and into my jaw. He has never come to our house except when Ima invited him and his wife Elise for *Shabbos*.

Rabbi Abrams is about forty with light brown bushy hair radiating out from his head. He has pale eyes and thin lips that disappear into his beard. When he gives a *d'var torah*, his nostrils flare as he speaks. Neshama and I used to giggle through his sermons, watching his nose vibrate as his talk became more impassioned. *Purim* climaxes every year with Rabbi Abrams' impressive break dancing.

I open the door. "Please come in."

"Hi Ellie." Rabbi Abrams steps into the hall. "I have an appointment with your father."

"Oh, I'll get him."

I knock on Abba's door. "Rabbi Abrams is here," I whisper, pushing open the door.

Abba glances at his watch and then straightens the collar of his plaid shirt. Several days worth of stubble accents his chin and cheeks, deep circles bag his eyes. He follows me back to the hall rubbing his hands over his corduroys, pulling his sleeves down over the dark hairs on his wrists.

"Rabbi, so nice to see you. Please, come in." They shake hands.

"You are well?" Rabbi Abrams asks.

"*Baruch Ha'shem*."

Abba hangs up Rabbi Abrams' coat, ushers him into the office and closes the door. I sidle up to the wall, holding my breath. Did Abba make the appointment, or did Rabbi Abrams request to see Abba?

The chairs creak and Rabbi Abrams speaks in a low voice. He mentions "Chana" and then "singing." I straighten against the door. There's a pause, and then Rabbi Abrams speaks more loudly.

"You have been a member of our congregation for many years. I value your commitment and your faith." He pauses. "I'm worried about Chana." Rabbi Abrams coughs. "Maybe if you talked to her. . . ."

Another long pause. I slide down the wall to the gray carpet. Poor Abba.

"I was thinking our synagogue may not be the best place for Chana, for her devotion."
 Rabbi Abrams continues speaking quickly, "I want her to be comfortable, to be able to *daven*.
 I'm not sure Beth El is that place."

I hear Abba drum his fingers on his desk. "I... um... well maybe she could pray
 somewhere else. Perhaps her mother's synagogue."

I gawk at the door, eyes bulging. *What* is he thinking? At Bubbie's shul, which she
 hardly ever goes to, the rabbi says "Please rise" and announces the page numbers. They recite
 most of the prayers in English and a choir sings down from a balcony. No one actually prays.

Rabbi Abrams says something in Hebrew I can't make out and then I hear them shifting
 in their chairs. I hide in the living room until he leaves.

I hear Abba talking to someone on the phone for a few minutes and then the noise of him
 pacing back and forth. I lie rigid in the living room waiting to see if Ima has really been sentenced
 to Bubbie's reform temple. "Ellisheva," Abba calls, "can you come here a moment?" I exhale
 and shuffle to Abba's office clutching my ocean encyclopedia.

Abba's eyes are hooded, his face pale. A Talmud lies open in front of him, his desk
 covered in papers with his neat notes. He sits, shoulders hunched, rubbing his knees. He glances
 at my ocean encyclopedia. "You're enjoying your extra courses?"

"Um, yes. I was at the science centre looking at an exhibit yesterday for a project."

He taps his pen on his knee. "Your sister is also studying very hard these days?"

My stomach contracts. "Yes, I think so."

"Good, good." He swivels back to his desk and glances over his papers. "I wanted to tell
 you I spoke with Bubbie. She says she'll be happy to have you, Neshama and your mother go to
 synagogue with her Saturday morning."

"To Bubbie's *shul*?"

"Yes." Abba twists his hands, pulling at his hairy knuckles.

"We have to go with her?"

"I think it best."

I sigh and lean against the wall. "Ima is going to be very sad," I whisper.

"Yes." His hand muffles his voice.

"Are you going back to Beth El?"

Abba wipes his eyes. I look away. I've never seen Abba cry, except at his parents' funerals.

"No. Not right now anyway. I will *daven* at my school for a while."

The *minyan* at Abba's school is all elderly holocaust survivors who live nearby. They mumble and rush through the prayers. There's no women's section.

Abba blows his nose and straightens his shoulders. "Your mother made a mistake and now she needs to deal with the consequences."

My eyes narrow and I glare at Abba. I'm not sure if I'm angry with him, or with Ima, for what she did. I turn to leave.

"Ellisheva?"

"What?" I face him.

Abba ignores my rude tone. "You'll ask your mother to go to shul with you and Bubbie?"

I stare at him, my mouth open. "Me?"

Abba sighs, takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes with his knuckled fist. He swallows.

"You'll ask her?"

I stand at the doorway, my hands clenched, teeth baring down on my lip. Abba's eyes rim red and watery. I nod and storm out before his tears slip out of the corner of his eyes.

I hurl my ocean encyclopedia onto the couch and stomp to the hallway where I yank on my boots and coat. Outside, I shove the front door closed, letting it smash into the jamb with a satisfying clatter, the side leaded-windows rattling in their frames. Snow has mounted on the driveway into a soft bed. I grab the shovel from the steps and start hacking a path from the front

door to the driveway. The snow froths over me, offering no resistance. I chuck the shovel on the lawn and head towards the subway.

Holiday shoppers pack the subway downtown, some jovial, others tired, their faces slack. I get off at the Eaton Centre and enter the mall. Carols blare and people jostle by carrying shopping bags. I start to sweat, clutching my hat and gloves. Stores drip with mistletoe and glittering red and green tinsel. Mothers herd eager children towards the long line waiting to meet Santa in his white Styrofoam castle. *Only seven more shopping days*, reads a giant banner.

I slowly make my way through the mall until I see Neshama at her stand. A few metres away, I stop and gawk. She wears a red and green apron over her turtleneck and skirt. A sprig of holly juts out of her headband. This is how Neshama will live, in God-less consumerism.

She waves me over. "Isn't this crazy? I've been wrapping since 9:30." She doesn't even ask why I'm here.

She wraps a white box in Santa paper and red ribbons, expertly pulling scissors through the ribbons until it stretches out long and then furls into tight curls. She hands the package to a man in a long overcoat. "Probably lingerie for his secretary," she whispers after he leaves. "Wait a few minutes and I'm off. Look busy talking to me about gifts and no one will come up and ask me to wrap. I tell all the men to buy jewelry. The smaller the box the bigger the love-"

"How can you stand to be in here?" I interrupt.

"Ka-ching." She rubs her fingers together.

I grab her hand. "Aren't you taking this a little far?"

"Blasphemous, isn't it?"

I sigh.

At five o'clock Neshama packs up her stand. As we walk through the mall, I tell her about Rabbi Abrams' visit and Abba's decision.

"What was he thinking? Ima hates Bubbie's shul." Neshama slaps her hand against the escalator handrail. "What are you going to say to her?"

"Nothing." We step onto the main floor of Eaton's.

"Hmm?" Neshama pulls me toward the makeup counter.

"I'll just invite her with us."

"She won't come." Neshama grabs a compact and from one of the counters and starts powdering my cheeks. "This will even out your skin tone."

I grimace but let her. "When she asks why, I'll just let Abba explain."

"What a coward, making you tell Ima. Serves her right though, how weird she was."

"Yeah but-" The scented makeup tickles my nose. Neshama steps back, avoiding the spray of my sneeze.

"But what?"

"I feel bad for her, she's going to..."

"Crumple?"

"Yeah."

Ima will deflate, melt into a puddle. She loves our *shul*. I push away Neshama's hand and check my reflection in the mirror. The makeup has caked my skin white. "You've made me look like a ghost."

A salesgirl with a perfectly made-up face leans over the counter at us. "Can I help you girls?"

"No, thank you," Neshama says. She turns my chin toward her. "It is a little too pale, even for you." She hands me a tissue and I wipe off the makeup.

Outside I let the night air ruffle my open coat, the wind refreshing after the crowds and the perfume section. I follow Neshama down Yonge Street and over to Nathan Philip's Square.

"Isn't this gorgeous?" She gestures toward the coloured lights and skaters in the square across from the mall. A giant Christmas tree looms behind.

"I suppose."

Neshama sighs. "Maybe next year."

I whirl around. "You'll have Christmas?"

"Maybe," she repeats.

I shudder, "You're kidding."

"Oh, just relax, Ellie."

Bubbie buys me goggles for Hanukah and offers to take me to the women's swim at her club. She leaves me in the empty change room for her tennis game. Alone I pull on my blue swimsuit, adjust the straps over my shoulders. I flex in the mirror, the curve of my biceps, the slight bulge of my shoulders visible.

Chlorine tickles my nose, tiles cool and damp under my bare feet, the pool long and inviting. My new goggles suck tight against my face, a few strands of dry hair hanging out of my swim cap. An elderly woman swims in the far lane, but otherwise the pool is deserted. Holiday season. Most of Bubbie's friends are in Florida already, and she'll go down in a few weeks. I pause at the edge, glance at the ladder, and then swing my arms behind me and leap. The cool shock breaks over me, dissipating my anger from yesterday. I rise gasping for air, spitting. I smile and push myself through the water. Breaststroke, like a frog. *Rana clamitans* peeping in the swamp beside the cottage.

My muscles warm up, tendons loosening, the back of my neck relaxing with each stroke. I tentatively open my eyes under water. Below me I see bubbles, tiles, pool lines, my own hands fluttering.

A few slow lengths of breaststroke and then I stop, stretch my arms overhead, then break into front crawl. One arm then the other. Cup and pull, breathe to the side, kick. Eyes open I can swim a straight line. I think of Ima singing in the shul and a shiver runs through me, and then a moment of anger, temples pulsing under the taut goggles. Just swim, Ellie. I kick harder, pulling the water past me with even more force. I will have calf muscles like Sarah, abs like Neshama

and pecs like Joe McIntyre. Energy surges through me. I break through the surface at the end of the pool breathing hard.

Back and forth, voices echo above the water, under the surface, quiet.

After the swim Bubbie pulls into the parking lot at Bathurst and Lawrence. "I want to pick up some chopped liver."

"I could help you make some," I offer.

Bubbie un-clicks her seatbelt. "No thanks, it'll make my whole house smell greasy. I'll just be a second. Do you want anything to eat?"

"No that's okay. I'm not hungry."

"Even after all that swimming?"

I'm actually starving, but United Bakery isn't kosher. If I suddenly start eating non-kosher food, it will certainly get back to Abba and Ima. "No thanks."

"Not even a cup of tea?"

"Okay, I guess a cup of tea."

We make our way through the ice-slick parking lot, stepping over frozen ruts and slushy puddles. The sky shadows grey, the mid-day light like late afternoon.

We sit at a table at the back of the restaurant, removing hats and gloves.

"So, you're joining me for shul this week I hear."

I stop folding my coat. "Yes."

Bubbie picks up her menu. "I heard your mother gave quite the performance the other night."

"Who told you that?"

"Your father called. You know, none of this would have happened if your parents went to a normal synagogue where women could participate. We fought for women's right at The Shar -"

"Bubbie, Ima stood up and sang at the top of her lungs in the middle of a concert. If Abba did that it would have been wrong too."

Bubbie spreads her manicured, ringed hands on the Formica table. "Well, at least now you don't have to go back to that shul."

I slap my menu closed, my eyes flashing. "I *like* that shul. I *want* to go back." Even if I don't believe anymore, even if I can't pray. My heart hammers in my chest.

A waitress passes by, her rubber soles slapping the linoleum. Bubbie plays with the clasp on her gold bracelet, snapping it open and closed. "I didn't know you felt that way."

"Yeah, that's because you're still waiting for me to become Neshama," I mutter.

Bubbie licks her lips, "That's not true."

The waitress stops to take our order.

"Are you sure you don't want anything to eat?" Bubbie asks again.

"Bubbie, it's not kosher."

"It's so important?"

"I'm sorry," I say to the waitress, "we're not ready to order yet." I stand up and push in my chair.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

Bubbie stands up, "Let me drive you."

I put on my coat. "If you want to."

She nods and walks to the counter for her order.

While she waits for her change, I mumble, embarrassed, "Thanks for taking me to the pool."

"You're welcome." Bubbie doesn't look at me. She tucks her scarf inside her beige coat, tightens the sash at her waist.

We drive home in silence. Bubbie's mouth twists into a grimace. She pulls up in front of the house. "Good bye Ellisheva."

I peck her on the cheek. "I'll see you at *shul* Saturday morning."

"Call if you decide not to come."

"Not on *Shabbos*," I say, and I slam the door of the Cadillac. I open it again. "Sorry Bubbie, about the door I mean. And thanks for the swim. And-"

Bubbie waves. "Enough. I'll see you Saturday."

The doorbell rings after *Shabbos* dinner just as Ima and I are clearing the table of dessert dishes. Neshama has gone to see Ruchi and Abba has escaped to *shul*.

I peer out the frosty window into the darkness. Sarah stands on the doorstep, chewing her lower lip, her braided hair flowing out from under a toque and over a long black coat. Nausea rises up my throat until I can taste bile in my mouth. I step back from the window a moment, my heart racing. I didn't think I'd ever see her again.

I open the door a crack. "Why are you here?" I whisper.

Sarah puts her hands on her hips, cocks her head to the side. "I was in the neighbourhood, thought I'd say hi."

"My parents are home," I hiss.

"Oh." Sarah glances uncertainly behind her.

"Ellie," Ima calls, "who's there?"

"It's just a friend."

"Well invite her inside already. It's freezing out."

I want to shove Sarah aside, shut the door in her face. Instead I take her coat, watch her tuck a white blouse into her blue and green kilt, smooth a navy sweater with a school crest over her hips. My teeth grind my cheek until I taste blood.

I lead Sarah into the dining room. "This is Sarah McMullen. And this is my mom."

"Chana Gold," Ima whispers holding out her hand. "Please sit down. Excuse my voice, I've got a touch of laryngitis."

"Nice to meet you," Sarah replies. "I'm sorry. I'm interrupting your dinner, aren't I?"

"No we were just cleaning up. Have you eaten?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Well-"

"Let me get you something."

I sit next to Sarah, pushing the crumbs on the tablecloth into a small mound in front of me. Sarah looks around the dining room at the walnut china cupboard, the brass *Seder* plate hanging over the buffet.

Ima comes back with a plate of chicken, potatoes and noodle kugel. "So how do you two know each other?"

I clear my throat, sit on my hands. "Sarah and her mom have the cottage next to the one Bubbie rents."

"Oh how nice." Ima folds her hands on the tablecloth.

"Ellie taught me about the stars."

I blush, my ears burning.

"This is delicious, Mrs. Gold."

Ima smiles. "Ellie you look flushed, are you OK?"

"Just hot." I take off my cardigan.

Sarah swallows a mouthful of potato. "I'm sorry to just drop by. I locked myself out of my house and my mom won't be back until really late."

And so you just decided you'd come here? It's not exactly around the block. "Don't any of your neighbours have a key?"

"They weren't home."

"Well you're welcome to stay here for the night," Ima offers.

My eyes open wide. Stay here?

"Oh, that's OK."

"Please, it's no problem. You and Ellie can catch up."

Say no. Say your mother will be worried. Say you have to study in the morning.

"Well, if it's not too much trouble... "

Ima waves a hand. "You should call your mother, leave a message for her."

"For sure."

"Would you like some tea?" Ima asks.

"That would be great."

Ima disappears into the kitchen.

"You can't stay here," I whisper.

"Why not?"

"Are you nuts? You can't."

Ima comes back with a plate of chocolate *rugelach* and a cup of tea before I can respond.

"Ellie's father made these."

Sarah takes a bite, "Delicious."

"You're so quiet, Ellie," Ima comments.

"I'm just tired." And suddenly I feel drained, my limbs slumping into the chair.

Sarah flicks her hair over her shoulder and flashes me a smile. I look away.

After Ima and Neshama go to bed Sarah and I make up the hide-a-bed in the living room.

"Your mom's really nice." She stacks the beige sofa cushions by the bookshelf.

"She likes having guests." I smooth yellow flannel sheets over the saggy mattress.

Sarah scans the bookshelves. "So is this what you guys do Friday nights?"

"What, eat?"

"No, stay home."

Thank God she didn't come in the middle of the blessings. "It's the start of the Sabbath, so we have a big dinner."

"What if you wanted to go out?" She pulls a Hebrew book off the shelf, flips backwards through the pages.

I shrug. "Not on Friday nights." I shove a pillow into a case, punching the down with my fist. "So why are you here?" My voice drops to a whisper.

Sarah slips the book back in the shelf, rubs the dust off her hands. "I was just in the neighbourhood."

I flop the pillows down on the bed and sit in the faded blue grey armchair. "Right. You already told me that."

"I just was."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Oh really? And what exactly were you doing here?"

Sarah places her hands on her hips, "I was visiting friends."

"And you're really locked out?"

Sarah turns around and pulls her vest and blouse over her head, reaching around to unhook a white lace bra. I lean back in the armchair, stroke the worn velour nap of the armrests. The nausea in my stomach finally settles, my hands falling open at my sides.

"Of course not. I had a fight with my mom."

Tan lines crisscross Sarah's golden back, three small plum-coloured bruises etch her side. She reaches for the plaid nightgown Ima left for her and pulls it over her head. It falls all the way to her calves.

"How did you bruise your back?"

"What bruises?"

"On your side there."

Sarah lifts the nightgown trying to peer over her shoulder.

"There," I say pointing, resisting the urge to place my fingers into the three spots, press.

She probes her back, winces. "Oh, I don't know." She dismisses them with a wave of her hand.

"I have another question."

"Some things never change." Sarah drops the nightgown, turns around and steps out of her kilt. "Yes?"

"Why did you leave the cottage without saying goodbye?"

She sits on the bed, rolls down her tights. "At the end of the summer? Oh yeah, we left a few days early because Dave had to get back to work. Of course my mom isn't seeing him anymore."

"And you couldn't say goodbye?"

She climbs into bed, starts unbraiding her hair, the long waves falling over her shoulders and the open placket at the neck of the nightgown. "It was really early in the morning."

"Oh. And the phone calls?" My toes press into the hardwood floor, my teeth grating over my lip.

She smooths her hair over her breasts. "I thought you'd be happy to see me."

I ignore the melting feeling in my chest. "You couldn't return my calls?"

Sarah sits up in the bed, rests her elbows on her upright knees, chin in her palms. "So you're not happy to see me?"

I smack the edge of the chair with the palm on my hand. "You don't get it, do you? You can't just come here."

"I thought you wanted to see me again."

I sigh, "I do, just not here." A toilet flushes upstairs. My shoulders stiffen. "We'll talk in the morning, okay?"

Sarah nods and yawns, stretching her arms over her head.

Upstairs I lock myself in the bathroom where the floor doesn't squeak and do pushups, not the ones with your knees on the floor either, but real pushups, three sets, until my arms ache. Sarah, in my living room, with only a nightgown on. The new cut in my mouth bleeds. A hundred sit-ups, my back pressing into the linoleum through the thin bath mat. Ten stairs down and I could curl up behind her on the saggy sofa bed, bury my face in her hair, like Bo and Hope, finally reunited. Thirty squats, breathing fast. Plum-coloured bruises like finger marks, like someone squeezed her tight.

Imagine, enough confidence to just show up at someone's house.

I spend the night twisting in my sheets, restless, rolling over. In the dim early morning light I watch the Christmas lights glowing across the street. I pull on my terrycloth robe and quietly make my way down the painted orange stairs, feeling the edges with my feet, my hands resting on the wooden banister. In the darkened kitchen I sip not quite steaming tea from the prepared thermos, try to warm my hands around the white pottery mug. At seven the light timers click on and the kitchen is suddenly bright.

In the doorway of the living room, I whisper, "Sarah?"

She mumbles and rolls over.

I tiptoe into the room, poke her shoulder. "You need to wake up."

She squints at me. "Why so early?"

I sit on the edge of the bed. "They'll be up soon." My hand snakes up to my neck to the hair growing in at the back of my head. "I... you can't come back here again."

"Oh." She sits, rubbing her eyes, looking strangely disappointed. "I was just in the neighborhood and I needed a place to go . . ." she stops, her voice tired. She pushes her hair out of her face, her eyes shadowed, her cheeks hollow since the summer.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"Sarah?"

She doesn't say anything.

"I'm sorry." I don't know what else to say.

She waves a hand. "No worry. Thanks for having me."

I twist my hands. I need her to leave before I have to explain how to make kosher tea, before I have to tell Ima that she can't go to shul anymore.

"You really should leave, before my parents get up."

Sarah nods. "Just a second, and I'll get ready."

"I'll walk you to the subway."

I creep upstairs and quickly get dressed. Sarah is already by the front door putting on her boots when I come down.

We stand at the front door, pulling on our coats and hats. I reach for the door handle, anticipating the creaky hinges. Sarah puts her hand over mine. "How about a kiss?"

I stop, stunned. "Here?"

"Sure. That's the other reason I came."

I pause. "What about, what about that guy." My groin hums warm and wet, my arms heavy in my coat sleeves.

Sarah steps closer to me. "He was *so* boring." She touches my hand, pushes her fingers under the cuff of my coat.

Just one kiss and then I can go back to being Ellisheva Gold, observant Jew, never been kissed - at least not by a boy.

The front of our coats touch and then Sarah's hand slides up my arm to my cheek. She guides my face toward hers and brushes her lips against mine, soft and warm. My arms slide around her waist to clasp her to me. Her tongue probes my mouth, the kiss deepening, my knees melting.

Footsteps sound in the upstairs hallway. Sarah and I spring apart.

"Ellie?" Ima whispers down the stairs. "Where are you going?"

"I'm just walking Sarah to the subway. Did we wake you?"

Ima comes down in her robe. "No," she whispers, "I've been up for hours. You didn't want to stay for breakfast?"

"Oh, no thanks." Sarah steps toward the door, pulling on her mitts.

Ima rubs her eyes sleepily. "I got up in the middle of the night and thought, did Sarah ever call her mom?"

"Oh well, on my way home."

Ima's eyes narrow. "Won't she be worried?"

"Well, I'm heading there now."

"Call anyway."

"Yeah OK, thanks for having me Mrs. Gold." Sarah flashes a smile, flips her hair over her shoulder and backs out the door, closing it quickly behind her. I swing the door open to follow her.

"Ellie."

"Yeah?" I lean back in the house.

"Go call her mother right away."

Sarah jogs down the driveway and turns onto the street. I glance back at Ima, "Yeah we forgot, sorry." Sarah looks back, waves. I step back out onto the front doorstep. "I'll call later."

Ima crosses her arms. "Do it now." I watch Sarah turn the corner, and then she's out of sight.

"Ellisheva."

"Yeah?"

Ima licks her lips. Her eyes thin to slits. Her voice is deliberate and slow, "I want you to call now."

I stop staring at the street and close the front door. "On *Shabbos*?"

"Yes."

In Ima and Abba's office I slump into the swivel chair, drop my forehead against the wooden desk. I pick up the phone and dial Sarah's number. It rings four times and then the answering machine clicks on. I don't leave a message. A sigh exits my body, exhaustion seeping into my limbs.

Ima raps on the door. "Let's go Ellie. We'll be late."

"Just a second." I lay my head back down on the desk. I want to hold Sarah's long beautiful strawberry gold hair, and gather it in my hands like a bunch of wild flowers. I slowly get up and head into the kitchen.

Ima is already dressed in her polka dot silk blouse and black wool skirt. "Nu? Are we going to shul today or not?"

I bite my lip and shrug, avoiding Ima's eyes as I sit across from Neshama at the dining room table. I check the kitchen clock, pour a bowl of bran flakes. Bubbie's shul doesn't start until after ten. Abba hasn't shown his face yet.

Ima stares at us. "Why are you so slow this morning?"

I sigh and curl my toes. Neshama and I look at each other across the table until she kicks me.

Anger swarms through me. I swallow a mouthful of cereal and turn to Ima. "Actually we're not going to go to Beth El this morning because we told Bubbie we'd go to shul with her. We have lots of time still."

Ima raises her eyebrows. "With Bubbie? She never goes to shul."

I pour milk over my cereal. "Actually, she wanted to know if you'd come with us."

Ima snorts, "Tell her no thank you."

"Oh come on, it'll be fun."

Ima pulls a mirror from her purse and smooths on creamy plum lipstick. "I'm going with your father."

I bite my lip. "Um, please."

Ima looks at me. "What?"

"I really want you to come with us."

"I can't stand her shul. What made you think we'd go with Bubbie?"

Ima stares at me, waiting for me to respond. "Ask Abba," I mutter.

Ima leans into the hallway and calls up the stairs, "Avram, are you coming already?"

Abba comes into the kitchen. He has circles under his red eyes. "You sure you don't want to go with your mother and the girls?"

"No thanks." Ima sucks lipstick off her teeth, checks the angle of her hat in her compact.

Neshama and I look down at our cereal bowls.

"Can I talk to you?" Abba guides her into the dining room.

Neshama and I stop eating, our ears cocked.

"What's going on?" Ima asks.

"You can't go."

"And why not?"

Abba pauses a long moment. "Rabbi Abrams asked you not to come back for awhile."

Ima doesn't say anything. "Why?"

Another pause. "You know why."

Ima doesn't say anything for a moment. She sniffles, "What if I promise not to sing again?"

"Not this week."

I peek around the corner. Tears well in Ima's eyes. She clicks the latch on her purse open and closed.

"I'm sorry, Chana-leh, but it wasn't right what you did."

"Asshole," Neshama hisses.

"Are you going back?"

"No."

"Where are you going then?"

"To my school." Abba clears his throat, mumbles something I can't hear.

"Oh, I see. What about me?"

"You should go with your mother."

Ima stands up, her voice rising. "I can't pray there."

"You burned your bridges," Abba says clearly.

Neshama slams her bowl down on the counter, makes a fist at Abba through the wall.

Ima sobs, "How can I make the Messiah come if I can't *daven*? I can't *daven* at my mother's shul."

Ima's sobbing washes out Abba's response. I want to wrap my arms around Ima, stop the sobs from her hiccuping, heaving chest.

Neshama and I don't move until we hear the front door open and Abba's footsteps fading. I peek into the living room. Ima slumps on the couch like a deflated balloon, shoulders collapsed against the armrest, arms limp beside her.

"Ima?"

She waves a tired hand at me. "Just go with Bubbie." Her voice is a thin whisper. I glance at her splayed legs, her brown heels dangling off her stocking feet. She wipes a hand across her face, smearing her lipstick across her cheek and exposed teeth.

I hesitate at the door. "Are you okay?"

She braces her hands on the arm rest, levering her torso upright a moment, then lets her shoulders sag again. She nods, mascara trickling down the side of her cheek.

"Go," she whispers, "you'll be late." She goes upstairs.

Back in the kitchen Neshama yawns, stretching her arms over her head. "I think I'll call into work and see if I can get a shift."

"On *Shabbos*?"

Neshama clears her bowl. "It's almost Christmas, it's really busy at the mall."

"You're making me go to Bubbie's shul alone?"

"Just call and tell her you can't come."

I roll my eyes. "You know I don't use the phone on *Shabbos*."

"You did this morning."

"That was an emergency."

Neshama leans toward me and whispers, "A girlfriend emergency?"

I stand up from the table. "Shut up."

"That's her isn't it? Your boyfriend from the cottage."

I grab her arm, twist the skin on the underside hard. "Just shut up."

Neshama yanks her arm away. "I'm not going to say anything- "

"Just shut the hell up!"

I shove Neshama so hard she hits the table, knocking over the garbage pail. Banana peels and crumpled napkins spill onto the floor.

I bolt from the kitchen and charge up the stairs. In my room I change into a navy velour dress I know Bubbie likes and then burst out of the house, pulling on my coat as I race down the front steps. Sunlight bouncing off the snow blinds me, but I don't care. I jog into the ravine, snow crunching under my boots, passing parents with golden retrievers and chocolate labs, babies in designer snowsuits. I don't care about Ima home sniveling, or Neshama not going to shul, or even an entire service like a church concert with Bubbie and her perfumed, chatty friends. Sarah kissed me, wrapped her arms around me like we did in the trees at the cottage on the flattened grass behind the sumac bushes, when her long legs wrapped around mine. Sarah wants to kiss me.

Bubbie's shul is an enormous building with carved Roman pillars, stained glass windows and sloped seating like a concert hall. The cantor plays organ and a choir sings from a balcony above the stage.

Bubbie sits in the back row next to another woman. She kisses me on the cheek. "This is Mrs. Simon." I shake hands with the woman. "Her daughter just had a baby."

"*Mazel tov*," I whisper.

"A boy, seven pounds."

"Please rise for *The Barchu* on page 316," the rabbi announces.

"That's wonderful," I say. We rise with the congregation.

Mrs. Simon thrusts photos at me. "Looks just like his grandfather, my late husband." She dabs at her eyes with a tissue.

"Bless God, the blessed one," The rabbi intones in English.

"Beautiful baby," I whisper.

"Blessed is God, the blessed one for all eternity," the congregation replies.

"Please be seated." We sit.

I flip through the mostly English prayer book. Bubbie and Mrs. Simon chat about condo prices in Florida. It's not like I want to pray anyway.

When I come home from shul Abba is waiting for me to eat lunch. He dishes out *cholent*.

"Where's your sister?"

"Um, I think she went to Ruchi's for lunch."

"You think?"

"I'm not sure."

"Didn't she go to shul with you?" His mouth folds into a tight line, his brow furrowing. He taps his fingers on the table.

I hesitate, "No she didn't." She's out somewhere wrapping gifts for *goyishe* people and their *goyishe* holiday.

"When's she coming home?"

"Ask her yourself."

Abba stares at me. I return his gaze without flinching and dig into the spicy bean *cholent*.

After lunch I take up a cup of tea to Ima. I open the door a crack, the light from the hall shining into her darkened room. I sit on the end of the bed. The room smells stale - like bad breath and sleeping bodies. Ima lies curled on her side in her yellow plaid nightgown.

"I brought you some tea."

"Thanks," she whispers.

"Are you sick?"

"Just tired."

I nod. Her eyes are red and shiny. "Do you want me to call Bubbie?"

She shakes her head. "I'll be fine tomorrow," Ima croaks. "Just a headache and my throat."

"Don't talk." I pat her hip. "I missed your singing this morning."

Ima tears.

"We'll sing next *Shabbos*."

"Where?" she whispers.

"Here, we'll sing here."

"How was Bubbie's?"

"OK. Well, lousy."

Ima makes a face. "Choir?"

I nod.

Ima comes down for *havdallah*, melts into the couch, her face slack and pale, sudden crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. Her voice has disappeared, as if it slid down her throat with the medicinal tea she drank for her cold, leaving her mouth open and gaping.

Neshama walks in just as Abba prepares the tray with the blue and white braided candle, the spice box and wine.

"Hello, I'm sorry I'm almost late." Neshama's cheeks are rosy from the cold.

"Why weren't you here for lunch?" he asks.

"I was invited to Ruchi's."

"Oh." He eyes her outfit, a beige corduroy skirt and black sweater. Neshama crosses her arms. "Ruchi's mom is sick again. I didn't want to over dress."

Abba nods. "Let's do *havdallah*." He lights the candle, passes it to me to hold, and begins chanting, "*Hee-nai el ye-shoo-ati*." Ima stands to join us by the dining room table. She clears her throat, but no sound comes out. Tears edge out her eyes, slipping like the candle wax down her face. She settles back into the couch.

I sigh looking at Ima and then turn back. I close my eyes and whisper along with Abba. I sniff the spice box, sip the wine and then dip the candle in the cup of wine. The flame makes a *tsss* sound and *Shabbos* is over. For a moment I feel grounded, rooted in a way I haven't felt since Ima sang.

Neshama shoves me inside the office. "What did you say to him?"

"I didn't say anything."

She wrenches my arm behind my back, forces me up against the desk. "I cover for you, you cover for me."

I try to pull away. "I'm not the one skipping out on *Shabbos*."

She squeezes my arm harder. "You cover for me, and I cover for you." She raises her eyebrows.

I pause a moment, catch my breath. "Whaddya think I've been doing all week?"

We glare at each other.

She lets go of me. "Fine."

After Neshama stomps out of the office I sit down at the desk and dial Sarah's number.

My heart pulses through my chest.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Ellie."

"I thought you'd call earlier."

"I had to wait until... I was just busy all day."

"I tried calling but there was no answer."

"Yeah, we don't really use the phone on Saturdays."

"Oh, is it that Sabbath thing?"

"Yeah, kinda."

I wrap the long phone cord around my hands and then start to spin, twirling the line around me, making my way from the desk over to the window.

"So was your mom angry about me not calling?" Sarah asks.

"Neh, she forgot. When I called your mom, there wasn't any answer."

"Yeah, she slept at her boyfriend's house."

"So she didn't know you were gone?"

"Nope."

I don't know whether I'm relieved or not. I unwrap myself from the phone cord, twirling back to the desk.

"So if I can't come over to your house, can you come over to mine?"

I gulp. "Sure. When?"

"Oh whenever."

Now? Tomorrow? "I can come Monday after school." I hold my breath.

"I'll see you then."

"Okay, bye."

I hang up and creep up the stairs to my room. I lie down on my bed and close my eyes. The room feels like it's spinning, like I've lost contact with the earth. I grab my prayer book from my backpack and then shove it back without opening it. I don't know a prayer to say when you're in love anyway.

I open my ocean encyclopedia instead and try to read about sea cucumbers but my body throbs like an earthquake waiting to happen, as if I am magma waiting to move along ocean floors, cause tsunami waves. I close my eyes and lean back on the bed, slip a pillow between my legs, clamp my thighs tight as a razor-backed clam.

The next morning I slip out of the house and take the bus to the pool downtown. In the change room I keep my eyes averted. I do ten laps, trying to keep Sarah out of my mind. I could just not go. Or I could just go and get my one kiss. That'll be enough. One kiss, and then maybe I'll stroke her hair, and I'll just walk out of her house. And then I'll be able to concentrate. Yeah right. I dive back in the pool and swim another few laps. What if our teeth bump or my nose gets in the way when we kiss? What if she wants to do something else? I sprint the last lap in the pool.

When I get home Ima is curled up on the couch, where she has been for the past week, except today she isn't in her grey robe, but her nubbly pink polyester duster. Her hair is greasy, her feet encased in wool socks, her heels poking through. She sits on the couch scribbling on her writing pad, her letters jagged like scars blasted in rock. Then she methodically rips the sheets into shreds.

"Hi Ima."

"Hey," she looks up from her pad.

"How's your voice?"

"Better."

I put down my bag. "So, are you going to school tomorrow?"

"Maybe, I don't know." Her eyes are vacant.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." I stand tapping my toes, my coat still on. Then I turn to leave, march to the front door.

"Where are you going?" Abba appears in the hallway wearing Bubbie Ruchelle's purple apron with the ruffle on the bottom.

"I'll be back in five minutes."

I slam the door behind me.

Back out into the freezing dark afternoon, I wrench my scarf around my neck. I slide over the icy patches all the way to the video store near the subway station. I rent three of Ima's favourite old videos: *Singing In the Rain*, *Roman Holiday* and *The King and I*.

Back at home I knock on Neshama's door.

"Come on in."

"Good you're here." I settle on her bed.

"What do you want?"

"I need your help. What are you doing now?"

"Nothing."

"Good. We're going to kidnap Ima."

"Who's we?"

"You, me and Bubbie. Pass me the phone."

Neshama stares at me as she passes her pink phone.

I dial Bubbie's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi Bubbie, it's Ellie."

"Hi dear."

"Can we come over and watch movies at your house tonight?"

"Sure."

"We're bringing Ima."

"Your mother wants to watch movies?"

"Well, she doesn't really know she wants to watch movies. We're going to try and cheer her up."

"Okay, how about eight? I'll get some ice cream."

"And one of those squeezey bottles of chocolate sauce?"

"And some Amaretto."

"Perfect. See you then."

I hang up the phone and look at Neshama. "Are you in?"

She shrugs. "Sure."

In the living room I hand the bag of videos to Ima. "I brought you something."

She looks at the bag. "What's this?" She unfurls her limbs, sits upright on the sofa. She takes out *Roman Holiday*. "Audrey. I haven't seen her in ages."

"I thought we could go over to Bubbie's."

She blinks back tears. "That would be great." She stands up and wraps her arms around my waist, reaches up to kiss my cheek.

"Ima?"

"Yeah?"

"You could find a new shul, couldn't you?"

Her tears start to flow down her cheeks. "I suppose I could."

Monday I sneak out of class early to meet Sarah. I take the subway to Rosedale and then

make my way through the maze of Sarah's neighbourhood. I catch up with her just before her house.

"Hi."

"Hi. You're earlier than I thought."

"Oh," I blush. "I didn't want to be late."

Sarah turns the key in the giant oak door and guides me into a large wood-paneled front hall. A staircase curves up to the second floor. Light streams over a window seat surrounded by potted jade plants at the side of the hall. She starts unlacing her high black Doc Marten boots. I take off my coat.

"Is that your school uniform?" she snickers.

I look down at my creased pleat skirt, cringe.

"And I thought kilts were bad."

"I was going to change, but I forgot." I brush my hands down my skirt, clench them behind my back.

Sarah reaches down to pull off her boots, her hair falling forward, revealing the delicious curve of her neck. I quickly turn away, peer through leaded-glass doors into a high ceiling living room. Two overstuffed sofas dominate the space, saggy and threadbare, surrounded by antique tables and bookshelves. Faded red drapes cover the windows at each end of the room. A water stain mars the far wall by a piano, like an oil slick on the sea.

Sarah yanks off her boots and leaves them lying in a wet puddle by the door. "C'mon in," she says.

I follow her through the spacious hall past a dining room with an ornate crystal chandelier hanging over a long polished table. Floral wallpaper, large red roses on a cream background, covers the bottom part of the walls. Golden-edged dinner plates rest on a carved molding around the room.

Sarah leads me into a large kitchen, surprisingly similar to our own. The white painted cupboards are too high, the counters the same rippled gold-flecked Formica. A faucet drips on a sink full of dirty dishes, the open door of the pantry revealing cereal boxes askew, overturned spice bottles, bags of rice and pasta spilling open.

"Yolanda comes tomorrow," Sarah says, nudging an enormous garbage sac closer to the back door.

I lean on a stool, looking at the ample counter space. "My father would love to cook in this kitchen."

Sarah eyes me skeptically. "It's a total time warp." She yanks open a sticky cupboard and gets two glasses. "Juice?"

I nod.

She opens the refrigerator and gets a carton from the almost barren shelves. "My mom's been trying to decide to redecorate or sell for the past ten years."

"Oh." I sip my juice.

She grabs a box of crackers from the counter. "Want some?"

"No thanks." I look at the dingy dishes. "So who cooks, you or your mom?"

Sarah opens the freezer to show me stacks of frozen dinners. "Yolanda also makes stuff for us a few times a week." She finishes her juice and stuffs a few more crackers in her mouth.

"So what do you want to do?"

I grind my teeth. "Um, I don't know."

Sarah's eyes light up, her lips sliding into a grin. "I know."

I bite my lip, gulp down the rest of my juice.

"You like games, right?" Sarah stands, hands on her hips, in the middle of the kitchen.

I lean against the counter. "Sure. Like, um, like dare?"

"Yeah like dare, except this is a little different."

I crack my toes on the linoleum. "Um, sure."

Sarah stacks our glasses on the pile in the sink. "C'mere."

I follow her back to the hallway. "Okay, here's what you do. You stand here and count to ten with your eyes closed, and then you have to find me."

"Like hide-and-go-seek?"

"Yeah, kinda like that, but it's a little different."

"How so?"

Sarah smiles, "You'll see. Just stand here." She positions me on the thin circular carpet.

"Close your eyes."

I glance around at the maze of closed doors. "I'll never find you."

Sarah steps closer to me. Her huge eyes make me hold my breath. She places a hand on my shoulder and leans toward me, "Yes you will," she whispers.

Her voice sends tingles down my back. The skin on my legs and arms is alive. I close my eyes and start counting. *One, two, three.* I hear the stairs creaking, Sarah's footsteps light and quick. *Four, five, six.* My heart pounds. *Seven, eight, nine.* Silence around me. *Ten.* I open my eyes, wipe my sweaty palms on my pleated skirt. I creep up the stairs, the wood groaning under my feet.

Upstairs I tiptoe down a hallway, my heart thumping. I pause at a corner, my hands clenched at my sides, press my back against the wall. Slowly I peer around to the left. Sarah pops up in front of me, grabs my arm. "I got you."

I gasp, take a step backwards.

"I got you," she giggles, her hand wrapping tight around my thin wrist.

My heart races. "I thought I was chasing you."

"And me you."

"Oh," I say. "Now what?"

"You take off a piece of clothing."

I flush, a queasy feeling rising up my torso. "Here?"

Sarah nods.

I rub my foot up my calf, take a small step back, Sarah still holding my arm. "What if your mom comes home?"

Sarah leans against the wall. "She won't. She never gets here before six thirty." She licks her lips, pulls at the sleeve of my cardigan. "It's just a sweater. Don't you want to play?"

I let her tug my sleeve over my hand. I shrug the cardigan over my shoulders, the warm wool slipping down my back, dropping around my ankles. Sarah's eyes graze my thin white blouse, my nipples jabbing against the blue satin cups of my bra.

"Okay," Sarah says, "It's my turn to count. You hide."

"Wait."

"What?"

My hand reaches out to the hem of Sarah's kilt, tugging at the edge. "I found you too," I whisper. I can't believe what I just said.

Sarah furrows her brow. "So you think I should take off something too?"

I cross my legs, press one shoulder up to my ear. "Yes," my voice barely audible. I look down at her stocking feet.

"Fair enough." She smiles and starts pulling off her vest. Then she stops, raises one eyebrow. Her hand slides down her blouse, over her kilt and then snakes up one bare thigh. My mouth drops open as she hooks a thumb under her panties. She wiggles them, white and lacy, down her legs, and lets them drop down to her ankles. She calmly steps out of them and shoves them in her cardigan pocket. I draw in a deep breath and lean against the wall.

"So I can tag you and you can tag me?" I ask, swallowing.

"If you can find me." Sarah's fingers trace the bony ridge of my now naked wrist.

"Is this hide-and-go-seek or tag?"

"Both, neither." She smiles, "Whatever you want it to be." She strokes the small hairs on my wrist, and then slips her fingers between mine, our palms pressed tight.

Sarah cocks her head to the side, a finger at the corner of her mouth. "You'll figure it out, I know you're smart." She tightens her grip on my hand pulling me towards her. "Catch me if you can," she whispers. Then she pulls away, her hair streaming loose behind her. I lunge down the hallway, my fingers grazing her waist by the open door of the bathroom.

Sarah stands laughing. "Okay, you got me," she says.

Suddenly I'm embarrassed to have caught her so fast, my face crimson. "I... I ... You don't have to take off anything, I just, I just want to..." my lips fumble. Sarah waits for me. "I want to touch your hair," I blurt. Heat climbs up my cheek. I stare down at the carpet.

She stops laughing. "So touch it."

I breathe in deep, pausing a moment before stepping closer to her. I run my fingers tentatively over the top of her head, let them trail down the long, soft strands to her shoulders. Sarah watches me curiously, her huge eyes fixed on mine. I gather a thick lock of her ocean curved hair and bring it up to my face. "I love your hair," I whisper. It smells like the day we lay in the wild grass in the field with the sumac. I close my eyes inhaling her scent, burying my fingers in the strawberry blond waves until I feel her fingers on my hip, edging my blouse out of my uniform skirt.

My eyes fly open. "You didn't tag me back."

She spreads her cool hands over my bare narrow stomach. "I'm tagging you now," she says. Her hands reach up to my breasts.

I gasp, my nipples stabbing from the bra into the palms of her hands.

Our fingers work the buttons on our blouses, pushing plastic through the cotton holes. Sarah wears a white bra, lace petals around her puckered nipples. I hold the weight of her breast in my hand, heavy and white, feel its round bottom curve, watch the nipple crease tighter under my gaze.

Sarah sighs, "Tag me," she murmurs, "please tag me."

Chapter 9

Nose deep in the sofa, my cheekbone rests against Sarah's warm shoulder, our legs entwined.

"El?" Sarah nudges me.

"Hmm." I bury myself deeper in the velvet cushions.

"You need to go."

I sigh, "Time?"

"5:30."

I slowly get up from the sofa, twist my school skirt straight, pick panties from my bum.

I've gone to Sarah's every Tuesday and Thursday for the past two months. I haven't been to the Science Centre since the winter break and Becca has almost given up on me. I try and see her on the weekends or call in the evenings, but I know she is hurt. She hangs out most of the time with Esther now.

Sarah and I spend the afternoons watching TV in the den on deep white couches, the blinds drawn. With a velvety blanket over our laps, our fingers stroke the edge of a hem, a knee, our breath heavy and warm. Hands travel up smooth white tights to cotton underpants, the sharp gasp of fingers between warm wet folds, legs splayed, breath muted. Mouths hang slack, too busy breathing to kiss.

Sarah watches me comb my hair. "What do you tell your parents?"

"Library."

"And they believe you?"

I nod.

"Mine wouldn't."

"I'm the good girl. Besides..."

"What?"

Ima sits in her office every evening scribbling. Abba spends long hours at school working on an article. "They watch Neshama more."

"Is she as bad as you?" Sarah grins in the dark.

I tuck in my blouse. "She has other agendas."

"Like?"

"Money and school."

"And you?"

I almost say love, the word on the edge of my lips. "I have, I have other ... "

"More bodily concerns?" Sarah reaches out and strokes my knee.

"What's your agenda?" Say love, say it's love. I stop dressing and watch her.

Sarah stretches lazily on the couch. "Oh, I don't know. Stripping." She grins.

I sulk into the couch.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing."

Sarah walks me to the subway. It's already dark outside, the night air damp, the streetlights casting pools on the snow. We walk silently through the quiet streets.

"What do you think your parents would do if they found out?" she asks.

I think about this for a moment. "Cry."

"Cry?"

I nod slowly. "Yours?"

Sarah shrugs. "I've never thought about it."

Every night I lie in bed worrying, what if they find out? I buy more teen magazines and plaster my walls with stupid glossy centerfolds. I even buy a Patrick Swayze *Dirty Dancing* poster. If we were still going to Beth El, Mrs. Bachner would sniff me out, her hooded eyes

staring into me until she figured out what it was. "Oh, that Ellie Gold, she walks different than she used to."

I've started going swimming on days I don't go to Sarah's. Another lie to Abba: I tell him I only go to the women's swim, which isn't true. Every second week I think, I won't go back to her, I just won't. But I do. January and February has been full of slow, sweet kisses and crawling fingers.

I say goodbye to Sarah at the subway entrance.

"Where are you going now?" I ask.

"Just out."

"Oh."

"Come by next week."

"OK."

"See you."

"Yeah, see you." I try to keep disappointment out of my voice.

I pause at the subway entrance. Sarah rounds the corner to Yonge Street and heads down the block, away from her house, and then stops at the crosswalk. She takes off her toque, shakes out her hair. Then she extends one arm, her gloved-thumb lifted away from her closed fist.

Eyes open wide, toes curling in my boots, I press myself against the wall of the station. Cars pass, throwing slush into the snow bank under the streetlights. People pass in chic overcoats carrying brief cases or shopping bags. I hold my breath, shivering. A Corvette slows down, Sarah turning her head to follow it, her stance wide. She runs her hands through her hair, her huge eyes staring at the car. It slows down at the corner near the subway. I sneak behind the entrance, my hand over my mouth. My knees lock, my arms rigid as she leans into the car window. A sick feeling rises up my throat as she opens the door and slides in. I catch a glimpse of a guy in a baseball hat.

I stare at the departed car, the snow falling over me. My breath melts on my scarf, the wet wool chafing my chin. A wave of warm stale air hits my nostrils as I push my way into the subway.

My hands come up in the air and then slap down against my legs. She dared me to hitch at the cottage. The time she came to my house, the bruises on her side. She just happened to be in the neighborhood. Who drove her then? When her mom called that time, was she in some guy's car, with his hand on her legs? My teeth chattering, I step onto the northbound train. I slump into a seat, staring straight ahead. Anger slowly seethes inside me, my fists forming tight bundles at my sides. This is what I get for being with girls. Tears start to well up in my eyes. I squeeze my lids tight, but the tears edge their way down my cheeks. A woman taps me on the shoulder, her face kindly. "Have a tissue, miss."

"Thank you," I whisper.

I look up and realize we're already at York Mills. I get off and head back south.

At home I find Neshama upstairs in her room. I stand at the doorway watching her. She takes her music boxes off the shelf and wraps them in tissue paper and places them in a carton.

"Can I talk to you?"

She whirls around. "I'm busy now."

I lean against the doorframe. "Are you going somewhere?"

"No." She doesn't look at me.

"Then why are you packing?"

"I'm not. I'm cleaning."

She fills a box with teddy bears from her bed.

I sit down at her surprisingly neat desk. "Even Mr. Bear has to go?"

"Yep." She chucks him into the box.

I lean over and pull out the little blue bear Bubbie Rosa gave her and tuck it under my arm.

"Can you close the door?" she asks.

"Me in or out?"

"Doesn't matter."

I quietly close the door, leaving her alone.

Saturday morning Ima comes into the kitchen wearing her navy suit and matching hat. Her hair is neatly waved, her eye makeup carefully applied. "Anyone want to come to *shul* with me?"

Abba sips his coffee. "Where are you off to this time?"

"Same as last week."

Ima eats a croissant, careful not to smudge her lipstick. "Wanna come?" she asks hopefully. "I think you'd like it."

"Oh, I think I'll just head to school." Abba puts his coffee mug in the dishwasher.

She shrugs and pops the rest of the croissant in her mouth.

For the past two months Ima has been trying different *shuls* all over the city. She went back to work with circles under her eyes the day after our movie marathon, her voice still weak, but I haven't heard her sing in months, not at *Shabbos*, not even in the shower. She's been quiet, calm, back to staring out the kitchen window at the pillows of snow covering our back yard.

"How about you girls?"

"I'm going with Ruchi," Neshama says.

"Ellie?"

I hesitate. I haven't really spoken to Abba since Rabbi Abram's visit.

"You can come with me and Ruchi."

"Well um, yeah, maybe I'll do that."

I went to *shul* with Bubbie until she left for Florida. Since then Neshama and I've been doing this routine with Ima and Abba. Once they leave, I spend the mornings at home reading, or

wandering through the snow covered ravine. Saturday morning has opened into a gray time of indecision. Bubbie's been back from Florida for a few weeks, but she made it clear she wasn't interested in attending every week.

Ima and Abba put on their coats. "See you girls at lunch. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you," Abba says. "We'll be having guests again starting next week." He smiles at us and closes the door behind him.

"No!" Neshama wails.

I drop into my chair. "Great, Gold Family Catering resurrected." No one has said anything about Ima's book, or the dinners, for months.

"Forget that. I'm doing as little as possible." Neshama pulls her blond curls into a plastic butterfly clip, fluffing out her bangs. "So what are you going to do today?"

"I dunno. You?"

"I'm going to the library. Wanna come?"

"Neh."

I wander picking up books and putting them down. I think about Sarah laughing next to some guy in a car, and shudder. In the office I sit down at the desk and look at the phone. The receiver is smooth in my hand. Sarah picks up after the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's me."

"I thought you didn't use the phone on Saturday."

"I don't, but, well, what are you doing now?"

"Watching cartoons."

"Can I come over?"

"On your Sabbath? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah... I just want to talk to you."

"Sure come over. It's just me and my Wheaties."

Outside I find myself walking up towards the shul instead of to the subway. The air is mild for March, but wet and gritty. Blackened snow banks the sidewalks and puddles of grey slush melt at the curb. An overcast sky hangs low, the air stagnant.

On Bathurst I watch families struggle over icy pavement to go to their shuls, the girls in long coats, following their black-hatted Abbas. I could walk into any one of those shuls where no one would know me.

I slip into the lobby of our shul just for a moment, just to inhale the scent of damp books and furniture polish. The bottom of my skirt clings a wet ring to my tights. I pull off my toque, my hair lifting out in a halo of static.

When I peer into the main sanctuary a wave of nostalgia rushes over me so strong that I need to lean against the doorway. The congregation sings *Adonai Melech*, the male voices low and sonorous, filling the building. Just for a second, I'll just listen a moment. I brush a wisp of hair out of my eye, catching a tear at the same time.

The women's voices draw me up the stairs to the balcony. In the stairwell outside the door to the women's section I grip the banister, listening to the women's voices surging toward the high ceiling. If Ima were here her voice would be the loudest, the most passionate. Tears welling in my eyes threaten to spill out. I hold my breath and count to ten. When I open my mouth to breathe, the song rushes out of my mouth, *Adonai Malach*, the Lord is King.

A woman comes up the stairs behind me. I'm blocking the door but I'm too embarrassed to say, I'm just going to pray in the hallway, so I go in and stand near the door. Only for a moment.

Adonai yimlokh l'olam va'ed. The Lord Shall be King Forever.

I tip my head up, let my eyes close, my voice scrolling into the desire to be heard. You are Our Father, Our King. I feel like a stack of drawers that have been off their tracks, the slots finally shuttling back into their dresser grooves. I've prayed this way every Saturday morning my entire life except the past two months. I don't care that I don't believe in Our Father Our King

anymore, I just want to grow up and be like other women with their husbands and babies and their toddlers leaning against their skirted-legs. I want to be part of this kingdom.

The cantor continues chanting the prayer. When I open my eyes Mrs. Bachner is staring at me, her eyes raking over my messy hair and damp skirt. I stare back, narrowing my eyes at her until she turns away. I swallow the bitter bile in my throat and bolt down the stairs, not minding the slapping of my boots against the metal edges of the steps.

I run to the subway, my feet sliding on the slick sidewalks. Our Father, Our King, who creates mean rules. Our Father Our King, an idea thought up by dumb men, and women stupid enough to follow them, but not me.

When I get off at Rosedale, the snow has turned to fat drops of sleety rain. The lawns are brown and patchy, the trees bare, the bushes still settled with white hats of snow, like old men.

Sarah answers the door wearing white flannel pajamas with small pink bunnies. "You're soaking."

"It's really gross out." I run my hand over my wet hair. She takes my coat and I roll off my damp tights. The backs of my legs are red and cold from my soaking skirt.

"You must be freezing. I'll get you something to wear. Or..."

"What?"

She smiles. "Follow me."

She leads me up the stairs to her mother's room. The walls are painted peach with white trim. Crumpled clothing and bags of dry cleaning lie scattered over a four poster bed and a stuffed chair. I follow her through the gloomy room into a huge blue and gold bathroom. Unlike the rest of Sarah's paint-peeling, creaking house, the bathroom is new, with navy fixtures and gold trim. A deep blue bathtub dominates the far end of the bathroom. Sarah turns on the hot water and pours a pink jet of bubble bath under the hot rush.

"Wanna take a bath?"

I stroke a gold towel rack. "I really need to talk to you."

"We can talk in the tub." She traces my cheek with her finger. Goosebumps form down my arms.

"Well um . . . okay."

I sit on the toilet seat cover while the tub fills. Sarah sweeps assorted tubs of creams, makeup brushes, bottles of nail polish off the counter and into a drawer. She shoves crumpled lingerie and damp towels into a clothing hamper.

While Sarah goes to get fresh towels I quickly undress, easing my thin body into the intense heat. Bubbles pop and my cold toes burn. I lean back, my limbs melting.

Sarah returns with fluffy beige towels. "How is it?"

"Heavenly."

She pulls her hair into a loose ponytail on top of her head and starts unbuttoning her pajama top. I gaze at her, my eyes riveted as she reveals one shoulder, then the other, swiveling her hips as she maneuvers the shirt down her back, revealing the juicy twin fruit of her breasts. I draw in my breath. She fluffs her hair, arching her back, one leg resting on the edge of the tub. I sink a little lower in the water as she slides her pajama bottoms over her hips. She kicks them aside and steps into the tub, settling her flushed skin across from me. She rubs her hand up the arch of my foot. "I told you I wanted to be a stripper."

I swallow, "Very professional."

"I could teach you." Her hand inches up my calf to my knee.

"I don't think it's my thing. I have other, less dangerous, career plans."

"I like danger." She kneads my quad, inching up my leg.

I swallow again, my muscles tightening. "Yes I know you do."

Her fingers stop. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I swallow.

Sarah raises one eyebrow, her eyes narrowing.

I hesitate. "I saw you that other day on the curb after I left, the guy's car."

She pauses, her face relaxing. "So, what about it? You should come with me."

"No thanks." I pull my leg away from her up to my chest.

"It'd be fun, us in the car-"

"With some guy?"

"What's wrong with guys?"

"Nothing, nothing's wrong." I sit upright in the tub, my breasts popping out of the water.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Why'd you want to go with, with strangers?"

"It's fun. I get to disappear for awhile." Sarah leans back in the tub.

"Disappear from what?"

"From this house, my school, my name even." She splashes water over her shoulders.

And from me, from our girl hips rocking tight like waves?

I climb out of the tub, wrap myself in one of the towels. I sit on the edge of the tub and scratch my knee. Sarah looks down at the bubbles.

"I wish you wouldn't do it."

"Why?"

"Because," I look at Sarah's scowling face. Because you're mine. "Because... it's dangerous," I blurt.

She laughs, "I know. It's not like I do anything with those guys. I just get lifts."

I stare at her. "I ... I ... don't want you to do that anymore."

Sarah's eyes narrow. The air between us hangs thick and humid like a cloud of rain, heavy and grey. She slaps her hand against the water. "I don't want to talk about it." Her eyes flash storm clouds. She climbs out of the tub, heavy breasted and flushed, rubs her body down with a fluffy towel. She leans over and presses her lips hard against mine, too hard, nips my lip. "Just don't," she says. "Just don't."

We get dressed silently and head back downstairs. My tights are wet on my thighs, my skirt clinging to my legs.

I slip on my boots at the front door. "I think I'll go now."

"I'll walk you to the subway."

"You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind." Sarah's eyes are still and calm.

"It's still snowing."

"I was planning on going out anyway."

I wait for her to lace up her boots.

When we turn down Yonge Street, she says, "Let's walk a little longer." I hesitate and then follow her down towards Bloor. A few metres past the bus stop Sarah undoes her coat, climbs onto a snow bank and sticks out her arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Wait."

I stand watching from the other side of the snow bank. An older man with a mustache waves. Sarah backs away, leans against a lamp post.

"Forget it. I'm going."

"Just wait a minute."

Another car stops, a red sedan driven by a young guy with a baseball hat. He rolls down the window. "Where are you going?"

Sarah leans into the car. "Depends."

He has longish blond hair and a sly smile. He blinks his blue eyes. "I'm heading uptown."

She looks back at me, "Perfect, right?"

I fold my arms across my chest. The guy unlocks the car door and Sarah climbs in.

"Aren't you coming?"

I back away. "Neh, I've got stuff to do."

"Oh c'mon. I dare you."

I shiver in my wet tights, the rain still falling.

"I double dog dare you." Sarah smiles her teasing grin. She slides one hand down her hip, glancing over at the guy in the car, her shoulder coming up to rub against her cheek.

"No, I'm not playing."

She shrugs and the car pulls away with her in it, swerving into traffic, spraying me with gray slush. I stare after the car until it disappears in the maze of lights and traffic. Vehicles roar up the street, people brush by me on the sidewalk, a dog stops to sniff my damp legs. I slowly wipe the slush off my coat with my mitten. I bite my lip and start running up Yonge Street, my feet slipping on the melting snow. My arms pump as I weave through side streets.

When I get home I run up to my room. Neshama follows me. "Abba was wondering where you were. I told them you stopped to talk to a friend."

"Fine." I slam the door in her face.

"Hey!"

"Go away."

"They're waiting for you for lunch."

"Tell them I'm not hungry." I jam an old book under the door.

"Ellie?"

"GO AWAY!"

I rip down the posters of Joe McIntyre and the others, and shred them into tiny pieces.

On Monday I can't find my *Chumash* and I forget my lunch at home. In the afternoon I fail my Shakespeare test. On Tuesday I go straight home instead of to Sarah's. When I get home there are two messages from her. I don't return them. I stare at my fish circling in their tank and then I reorganize my collection of fossils. Sarah calls again on Wednesday but I quietly hang up.

On Thursday we get out of school early for *Purim*. I race home and erase two messages from Sarah off the answering machine before anyone else hears them.

"What's with the phone calls?"

I lie on Neshama's bed watching her get dressed for *Purim*. "Nothing."

Her room is empty without the bears and music boxes. She even gave away the Harlequins from under the bed. Just her dresser is still messy - littered with makeup.

She pulls on a pair of black tuxedo pants, sings, "*Don't cry for me Argentina*."

"Why are you in such a good mood?"

"Just am. Do you want to be my lovely assistant?"

"Why, what are you?"

Neshama pulls on a tuxedo jacket and top hat. "Houdini." She holds out her arms. "I will now perform a magical disappearing act." She waves a tinfoil-covered chopstick and slips behind her closet door. "Ladies and Gentleman, Houdini has disappeared." She pops back out. "What are you going to be?"

"I'm not going."

She sits next to me on the bed. "They're starting to ask a lot of questions, the phone calls." She tries to read my face. I look out the window. "What's going on?"

"I can't tell you."

She squeezes my shoulder. "C'mon, *Purim* will be fun."

I groan. "Fine. Can you wave me a costume?"

Neshama turns to her mirror and starts patting on face powder. "How about a cat?"

"Too boring."

"Bride?"

"For sure not."

"The Grim Reaper?"

"Too morbid."

"How about Queen Vashti?"

"No one wants to be her. She wouldn't even dance for the King."

"Yes, but she kept her self-respect," Neshama shoots back. She adjusts a black eye mask.

In the end I drape a white sheet over me and go as a ghost.

In the chapel at Abba's school Neshama and I sit in the back row on the women's side, specially erected for *Purim*, listening to the chanting of the book of Esther.

Whenever the dreaded name of Haman is mentioned, the dressed up, painted, and inebriated crowd breaks into stomps and boos, rattling noise makers, twirling small plastic *gregors*. A parade of tiny queen Esthers with shiny dresses and heavily made-up faces up march up and down at the front of the women's section. Miniature Mordecais with painted-on beards run in the aisle. I slouch in my folding chair, listlessly fiddling with my *gregor*.

"Do you think Rabbi Schnell will breakdance?" I gesture to the elderly Rabbi reading from the scroll.

Neshama giggles. "I never thought I'd miss Rabbi Abrams." Then she clasps my hand. "I have something to tell you."

I turn to look at her, but I lose my eyeholes. I lift my bum and twist the sheet.

"I got into school," she whispers.

The congregation breaks out in stomping and yelling. An adolescent boy stands on his chair, his face red from alcohol. He beats his chest, yodeling "*yiyiyiyiyiii*" in a falsetto.

"That's great!" I hug Neshama and kiss her through the sheet, cotton against the hard plastic mask.

"Business?"

"Yes, but-"

"But what?"

Neshama pushes back the cuticle on her thumb. "I got into U of T and York, and also I got into UBC and U Vic."

"You applied away?" The congregation continues cheering, stomping Haman's name into oblivion.

"A-huh."

"Wow." I stare at her. "You're leaving?"

Neshama nods.

I hug her. "Wow, congratulations. Have you told Ima and Abba?" I glance at Ima a few rows up in her silk kimono and white face makeup. The congregation quiets down and the chanting continues.

She shakes her head. "Bubbie knows. She said she'd pay for it. The extra flights, living costs."

"That's amazing."

She nods again.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes. Sort of. Nervous and excited and I don't know." She pauses. "Now I have to tell them." She gestures towards Ima with her head.

"What do you think they'll say?"

"That I'm going to burn in hell." Neshama's mask conceals her face. She clamps my hand.

After the chanting, the chairs are pushed away and the dancing begins, the men in one circle, the women in another. At the back of the room tables sag with baked goods and an immense bowl of alcoholic punch. Neshama and I nibble on poppy seed *hamentaschen* and sip the tangy drink. The men form a tight circle, arms woven around shoulders, feet stamping in unison to a lively klezmer tune, clarinets blasting. A man dressed as a bride, a white veil covering his hair, his lips smeared with lipstick is hoisted up and down on a chair. "*Oy, Oy Oy*

Oy!" he shouts. Backless high heels dangle from his thick feet. He blows drunken kisses as they put him down.

The women hold hands, whirl by, feet twisting and kicking. Dancers break off to form smaller inner circles. A woman dressed as a gypsy spins in the center, hips jiggling, her enormous bosom heaving. The women catcall and ululate in shrill voices. A group of tiny Queen Esthers worm their way through the swirling, stamping women and form their own small clapping circle around the gypsy lady. Ima spins by, laughing, taking tiny steps in her kimono.

"You really want to leave all this?"

Neshama finishes the rest of her punch, hiccups and then shrugs. "Tradition is the illusion of permanence," she recites, her jaw firm. And then she pulls me through the circle of dancing, stomping women, weaving into the centre. Grabbing my hands she leans back and starts to turn. I shriek and then pull back harder, the room spinning.

On Friday afternoon when I leave school with Becca and Esther, Sarah is waiting outside. My cheeks burn. Becca and Esther stare at Sarah's short kilt and bare legs. "This is my friend from the summer," I mumble. "I'll catch up with you later."

"Bye Ellie," they say. "Good *Shabbos*."

"What are you doing here?" I ask Sarah when they walk away.

"I came to see you."

"You can't just come here." I guide her through the side alley to the bank parking lot.

"I waited for you to come over yesterday."

"It was a Jewish holiday. I had to go to *shul*."

"Well, you could've called."

"I didn't think you'd notice."

Sarah looks at me skeptically. "You've come over every week for the past two months."

"Yeah, well I'm sure you have better things to do, like ride in cars with boys," I mutter. I start walking down the side street.

"Do you have some time now? We could-"

"What?" I whirl around to face her. "Get in a car with some guys?"

"I just thought we'd talk-"

"I need to get home for dinner. We're having guests."

Sarah follows me, walking quickly to keep up with my long strides. "I thought you stopped doing that."

I walk faster. "They decided to start again. You really need to get out of here."

She grabs my arm. "Look, about last time, I just thought it would be fun."

I stop. "Fun? What about me?"

"I like being with you too."

"That's it? Fun? I'm fun like hitching, like boys?"

"Oh c'mon Ellie."

"Fun? Do you know what would happen if I got caught?" I stand on the corner, my mouth open, hands on my hips. "Do you have any idea how much I risk? You probably think it's funny, Ellie Gold: *yeshiva* girl by day, whore by night," I spit out the word. "You can do whatever dangerous stuff you like, but I can't."

"El-"

"You're not worth it. You don't really even like me," I hiss.

Sarah stares at me mouth open. "I'll call you later."

"Don't bother. Ever."

I run across the street, leaving her standing on the corner.

Reaching home, I burst through the front door.

"You're late." Abba stands waiting in the front hall.

"Sorry."

"Where've you been?"

"Busy." I take off my coat and hat.

"Busy? Guests will be here soon."

"I was busy."

He glares at me. "What's with you? You've been acting strange all week."

"Just leave me alone." I push past him to the hall closet.

"Hey!"

Ima peeks her head into the hall. "Ellie, just come and make the salad, okay?"

Abba follows me into the kitchen. Ima and Neshama are making meatballs, their hands sticky with raw hamburger. I sling my jacket and bag over a kitchen chair. Ima points to the tomatoes by the cutting board. I pick up the knife.

Abba asks, "Neshama did you vacuum?"

"You didn't ask me to."

"Can you do it now?"

"I need to finish getting ready."

His eyes flare at her and then he turns to leave. I hear the whirr of the vacuum cleaner a moment later.

"He's mad at me because I bought hors d'oeuvres instead of making them," Neshama says.

"What?" I stop chopping tomatoes.

"I said, Abba's mad at me because I didn't make the salads. Are you okay? You look really pale."

"I'm fine." I rip lettuce.

Neshama digs her hands into a bowl of raw hamburger meat. "Ima, are you going to give a lesson tonight?"

Ima rolls the cold meat into a sphere and drops it in a pot of simmering tomato sauce.

"Your father's going to talk instead."

"What?" Neshama spins around.

My hand slips, the knife nicking my knuckle. Blood dribbles out of the cut.

"He has something to say."

"About dating?"

"I'm not sure."

"Ima!"

I run my finger under cold water.

"What did you do?" Ima asks.

"It's nothing."

"Here," Neshama gives me a napkin.

"Let me finish that," Ima takes the knife from me. "Go shower." She looks at me carefully. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I mumble, "yes."

In the bathroom I turn the shower on and crouch in the tub, letting the water gush over me. I wish it were a rainstorm in China, a monsoon, hot drops falling in sizzling heat. I put the stopper in the drain and let the water build around my feet. I wish it were a flood, water crashing over banks, ripping through fields, wrenching trees, my body snatched on a wave. Tears sneak down my face.

When I get out, Neshama thrusts the phone into my hands. "Call her."

"What are you talking about?"

She follows me into my room. I plug in my hairdryer and start fluffing my hair. "She called twice when you were in the shower." Neshama yells over the noise.

I freeze and click off the dryer.

"I answered both times and then Abba unplugged the phone."

I relax.

"Ellie, she's going to call when *Shabbos* is over."

"I don't want to talk to her."

"She'll keep calling. They'll get suspicious."

Neshama pushes the phone into my hands and closes my door.

I sit down on the bed wrapped in my towel and dial Sarah's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's me."

"Finally."

"Look, you can't call here anymore."

"I was wondering when you'd-"

"You're not even in love with me, are you?" The word furls off my tongue before I can stop myself. I curl up in ball on the bed.

Sarah doesn't say anything.

"Then just forget it," I say. "Please stop calling."

"Can't we just be friends?"

I smirk. "I don't think you know what that means."

Sarah remains quiet. A sob rises up my throat. I wait another moment and hang up the phone.

Neshama knocks softly on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Go away." I sob silent cries, my chest heaving. I feel a hollow in my stomach, like a tsunami breaking sand off the cliff of my insides.

She pushes open the door and sits next to me, wrapping her arms around me. My tears stain the front of her yellow blouse. She strokes my wet hair.

"I thought you had a crush on Joe McIntyre."

I start to hiccup.

"What about Bo from 'Days'? And Danny Durschwitz?"

I start to laugh, still crying. I wipe my chin with the back of my hand.

Neshama passes me a tissue. "The guests are going to be here any minute."

I nod and blow my nose.

The guests are similar to the ones from the fall, a few young men, but mostly women, in modest clothing, eager to learn. Abba leads the blessings, Neshama and I bring out soup and salad and clear dishes. Ima serves meatballs. I eat without tasting my food, barely listening. I remove more dishes, help bring out dessert and tea. Abba makes a short speech about how we should all be waiting for the Messiah.

When Neshama and I start clearing the last dishes, Abba stops us.

"Wait," he says, "I want to show you something." He clears all the dishes onto the sideboard except one teacup, which he places in the centre of the table. Neshama and I gape at Abba as he walks around the table, flapping each corner of the tablecloth, shifting the crumbs toward the cup. He scoops the crumbs into the cup with his fingers. "There," he says, and places the nuts and fruit back on the table, a pleased expression on his face. "All clean."

Neshama gives him a skeptical look.

"Come, sit down." He pats the chair next to him. Neshama and I sit automatically, the other guests resuming their seats.

"Neshama," my father begins.

"Yes?"

"Tell me, what are the things prohibited on the Sabbath?"

Neshama stares at him. Abba hasn't tested us like this in years. "All work including sowing, reaping, gathering, winnowing, food preparation—"

"Ah, what is winnowing?"

"Winnowing?"

"Yes, what is it?"

She pauses. "I have no idea. I've only been taught to memorize, not-"

"Let me explain." He leans forward, knuckles on the edges of the table. "Winnowing involves beating the wheat to release the kernels. Yes?"

Neshama nods.

"Tell me, Neshama, is this work?"

"Yes Abba."

"And may we work on *Shabbos*."

"No Abba."

"Very good. Now, tell me, when we shake out a tablecloth on *Shabbos* eve, are we not releasing the crumbs from the cloth as if we were winnowing?"

Neshama grimaces, "I suppose you would think so."

"Then should we consider shaking this tablecloth to be work?"

"I guess," Neshama says slowly, "In your opinion, but-"

"Then," Abba slips into a sing-song, his right thumb coming up to accent his point, "By scooping up the crumbs like I showed you, we have found another way to keep God's word. And when we are closer to Him, then we are closer to bringing *Moshiach*."

Neshama's mouth settles into a hard tight line until her lips disappear altogether. She perches on the edge of her chair.

When the guests have left and Neshama and I are alone in the kitchen, I whisper, "If we all just sang and didn't worry about crumbs, wouldn't *Moshiach* come faster?"

Neshama glares at me, puts down the plastic container of carrots and marches into the dining room where Abba is still sitting with his prayer book. She yanks off the tablecloth sending salt and pepper shakers tumbling, knives clattering, dirty forks flying onto the carpet. She whips the tablecloth, ripping it through the air, the remaining crumbs scattering over the table and chairs. "Who cares," she yells, "who *fucking* cares?"

Ima pushes open the kitchen door.

Abba gawks, mouth open, eyes wide.

She flings the tablecloth on the floor at Abba's feet. "How dare you involve me in your crazy ideas? That's it. I'm finished with your religious crap. I'm leaving."

I crouch to gather the forks.

Abba stands up. "What are you talking about?"

Neshama gulps, clenches her hands. Her beautiful blond curls come undone from her bun, descending down her back. "I got into Business at UBC and U Vic."

Abba clutches his prayer book, his eyebrows shooting up. "BC? I thought you applied for programs here."

"I did, and away too."

Abba stands up. "How will you afford this?"

Neshama backs against the wall by the buffet. "Bubbie said she'd help."

Abba paces. "Where will you live?"

"In a dorm."

"With kosher food?"

"Oh stop it. I'm *leaving*."

He stops pacing and looks at her for a long moment. Neshama glares back at him, arms crossed over her chest.

He turns and walks straight out the front door without his coat.

Neshama crumples into a chair, her face pale.

Ima sits down at the table next to her. She picks up a knife from the carpet and taps the table. "You need to speak to your father with respect."

Neshama glares at Ima. "You don't get it either, do you?"

"No, I think I do. You're leaving, I understand that. You still need to speak to us with respect."

Neshama gulps back a sob. "I'm sorry."

Ima rubs Neshama's shoulder. "I wish you didn't feel you have to leave. Still, it's your decision."

Neshama nods. "Thanks." Her voice is muffled by Ima's shoulder.

Ima stands up and quietly picks up the rest of the cutlery and the salt and pepper shakers and the tablecloth and carries them into the kitchen. Neshama goes into the bathroom. I hear her gag and then throw up.

I knock on the door. "Are you OK?"

"Please go away."

In the kitchen Ima puts food away.

"Do you want some help?"

"Just your company."

I pick *Challah* crumbs off the counter. "You're not mad?"

"I already knew."

"How?"

"The mail, I saw the letters, but I knew it anyway."

"Whaddya mean?"

"That she'd leave. She's been trying to go all her life." Ima sighs, "The Talmud says the role of the parent is to raise independent children."

I sit for a moment, watching her wipe off the counters.

"Of course I don't want her to go. I think our lifestyle is best, but Neshama has to make her own choices." She rinses the cloth in the sink. "You can't force someone to be religious. If it doesn't come from love for *Hashem*, what good is it? I'm not a fighter anyway."

I nod. I'm not a fighter either.

I sit quietly thinking about what Ima said. "Did you enjoy Abba's speech?" I ask.

"Sure, yes."

"Are we going to have to avoid winnowing now?"

"As you like."

"Huh?"

"You and your sister have to make your own decisions. If not shaking out the tablecloth makes you feel closer to *Hashem*, then good."

"And if not?"

"You do what you have to do."

I pause listening to the running water. A cool breeze blows in the window. I rub my arms.

I take a deep breath. "What if there's other parts of the Torah that I don't think I can follow?"

"Like what?"

"Just some of the laws."

"Well, ultimately you have to decide for yourself." Ima comes over and smooths my hair. "Do the parts that make you feel close to *Hashem*."

"Do you ever find parts of the Torah you can't follow?"

Ima laughs, "Like *Kol Isha*?"

"I guess."

"You do what you have to do."

I nod.

Ima turns off the water and faces me. "Will you come to *shul* with me next Friday night?"

"Which *shul*?"

"This one I've been going to downtown."

"What's it like?"

She pauses, thinking. "It's like, like one big burst of energy."

"Oh, well, sure... I guess so."

She smiles. "You'll like it."

The following week I come home every day after school and catch up on all the homework I've missed. I write a makeup test on Shakespeare. On Wednesday after school I drag Becca and Esther to an IMAX film on coral reefs and in the evening I help Abba make muffins for a school bake sale. He doesn't talk to me the whole time, glowering in the flour. Neshama is almost never home. She even sleeps at Bubbie's one night. At night I hear Ima and Abba arguing in their room.

"At some point you have to let them go," Ima says.

"First you have to protect your children, guide them," Abba replies gruffly.

"She's not a child anymore."

On Friday I walk with Ima to her new *shul*. She leads me up a narrow flight of stairs to a large multi-purpose room, with a screen down the middle and rows of chairs. A modest ark sits on a wooden table at the front of the room. On the women's side a hallway leads to a bathroom and a small library where we leave our coats heaped on a table.

Ima and I choose seats in the middle.

"Why's it so quiet?"

"We're early."

A few women smile and nod to us as they take their seats. I notice the men's side has no chairs, the tops of their heads visible over the thin screen. The room gradually fills up, grows crowded until there are not enough seats, younger women standing at the back. Ima is the only woman wearing a scarf covering her hair. A few young mothers with babies wear stylish hats.

And then a voice from across the screen calls out, "*Mizmor Le David*," and voices rise around me male and female, loud and vibrant, passionately chanting the first invocation of the

start of *Shabbos*, the Psalm of David. Ima closes her eyes, her prayer book to her chest, her voice blending in with those around her. I haven't heard her sing since December.

"*Sing the song of David, render his words unto him, and let peace into your soul.*" Her voice slides through me, breathy and passionate, making me shiver.

The week slides off me: Neshama and Abba's argument and then their silence, Sarah's phone calls and then her silence. Voices harmonize around us. I start to hum and the tension melts from my shoulders, my lips forming the words. I haven't prayed in months, not at school or at home.

The prayer ends, the tune melting into *Yedid Nefesh*. I peer over the screen to see who is leading, but all I can see are rows of men's heads and a small red-headed child dancing wildly from the shoulders of a very tall man.

The room grows more crowded, heat pressing in. Girls in rows ahead take off sweaters and reveal thin bare arms, shoulders even.

We slip from prayer to prayer, one continuous burst of song-filled energy and passion. The tunes are new, but the words are the same. I close my eyes and let my voice resound with the others. I don't care what the words mean, I just want to sing.

When the singing stops I open my eyes, and file out of the room into the cool spring evening. Sweat evaporates from my hair.

Ima kisses me, "*Shabbat Shalom*." We stand on the pavement, watch people greet each other and then we start the long walk home.

"That was really different," I say. We head up the hill on Bathurst, cars whizzing by.

Ima smiles at me. "The singing is good, isn't it?"

I nod.

"You can really feel the presence of *Hashem* there."

I shuffle my feet on the pavement, look down. "Ima," I clasp my hands behind my back, "Do you really believe in, you know, believe in God?"

"Of course I do."

"Even after what happened at Beth El?"

She blushes a little. "That's just people acting foolish."

I raise my eyebrows.

She sighs, "Look, this is the way I think about it. God - it's a hard concept. Think of it as just a force."

"A force?"

"Yeah, like gravity. You believe in gravity, right?"

"Yeah sure."

"Well that's all God is."

I crinkle my brow. "Something that holds us on the earth? That doesn't make sense at all." I swing my hands down against my thighs. "You can measure gravity, you use Newtons or whatever, but you can't measure God."

Ima nods and doesn't speak. She stops at the intersection to wait for the traffic to clear.

"Do you believe in love?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you believe in love?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Can you measure that?"

I swallow. "I guess not."

"How do you know you're feeling it?"

I think about Sarah in her kilt and sweater running down the halls of her house. I shake my head and concentrate on Ima. "You just do."

"So what's the difference? We can't measure love but we never deny its existence."

The traffic light changes and Ima starts walking. I pause on the sidewalk. We can't measure love, but we never deny its existence. And God? I jog to catch up to her. "I don't get it. It's just the same?"

"Well, that's the way I think of it."

"And science?"

Ima looks at me, "Sure, love, science, I don't think there's much difference. Do you want to walk through the ravine?"

The light is starting to fade around us. "We'll have to walk fast."

We head down the slope to the path. The snow has melted and the earth looks raw and tired, dark piles of mulch, rotted leaves tramped down.

"In Jerusalem," Ima continues, "when we walked to shul you could see the whole city quieting down, everyone getting ready for rest, the traffic thinning out. I loved that."

"Ima, what you said about God and love, you think it's in all love?"

"Sure. I think so, don't you?"

I kick some rotted leaves. "Even if you love the wrong person?"

"Oh, I don't think there's any such thing."

"Really?"

"As long as they don't hurt you."

"And if they do?"

She glances at me. I squirm. "Then you leave. Fast." I avoid looking at her. "I still think love is always good. I loved being in California and I don't think it was the right thing for me, but I still felt loved there."

"Do you ever think about going back?"

Ima looks up at the trees, shrugs her shoulders. "I want to be somewhere quiet, somewhere without traffic and, you know, people who judge, the Mrs. Bachner's of the world

maybe. But not there. I like that shul, just song and prayer." Ima grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. "I'm really glad you came with me tonight. I knew you'd like it."

"The singing was good."

"We'll have to take Neshama or Abba."

"I don't think Neshama wants to go to shul anymore."

Ima's voice is sad, "I know."

The light around us dims into shadows, the bushes looming around us. "We'd better run if we're going to make it before it's really dark. Abba and Neshama will be waiting, hungry."

Ima nods and we pick up our pace, jogging along the dark path toward the streetlights at the top of the hill.

When we arrive home, Neshama and Abba stand facing each other in the kitchen.

"Just listen, okay?" Neshama raises her hand. "You believe following certain laws will help bring the messiah, right?"

Abba nods again wearily.

"How long do you think they've been going at it?" I whisper to Ima. She shrugs her shoulders and starts pulling food out of the refrigerator. I stand by the counter, listening.

"Well, those very same laws that you find so uplifting," Neshama continues, "are oppressive and patriarchal to me. The covenant God makes is with Abraham, with Issac and Jacob. He *never* makes that covenant with Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel or Leah. They're just there to bear male heirs."

"And you don't think that's an important role?" Abba asks quietly.

Neshama flails an arm above her head. "It can't possibly be the only role for a girl!"

"I'm not saying it is."

"But Abba, that's all the bible, that you take literally, offers women. Look, all I'm saying is that the laws work the opposite for me as they do for you. They make me unhappy. That's not what religion is supposed to do."

"No, it's not."

"Good." Neshama looks relieved. She relaxes her arms by her sides.

Abba stands up. "Are you finished?"

Neshama nods.

"Okay, I have one question for you."

Neshama sits down in a kitchen chair. Abba stands by the sink and takes a deep breath.

"Hitler wanted to kill the Jews, to eradicate Judaism, yes?"

Neshama bites her lip, nods. Ima stops stirring the soup.

"He was almost successful." Abba swallows. "I grew up without grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins."

I look down at my feet. Abba's voice is strangely quiet, subdued. I lean against Ima's shoulder. She strokes my hair.

"By abandoning tradition, are you not helping Hitler's plan?"

Neshama doesn't respond immediately. Then she smacks her palm against the table.

"Jeez, Abba, Hitler was crazy. He didn't care if people were religious or not. He thought Judaism was a race, not a religion." She stands up. "Is that the only reason you can come up with to be religious, because Hitler tried to kill us?"

A long pause. "I worry about our fragility," Abba says.

"I'm sorry Abba," Neshama says quietly, "but that's not good enough for me."

No one says anything for a long moment. Abba sits at the table, his hands lose in his lap.

"We won't talk about it anymore. Let's make *Shabbos*."

He gets up and holds the door open to the dining room and Ima, Neshama and I take our seats at the table. Abba quietly leads us in *Shalom Aleichem*, his head hanging down.

Saturday afternoon I put my *Chumash* and the shells from Ima in my backpack and wander over to Bubbie's house. It's a beautiful early spring day, the sun high, the streets alive with people. Bubbie sits on her back porch drinking coffee.

She kisses me. "I haven't seen you in ages."

"I've been busy."

Bubbie sighs. "So is Neshama, and she's here. Is she talking to your father yet?"

I slip into a deck chair. "They had this big discussion last night. I'm not really sure how it ended."

She strokes my hair. I lean against her shoulder. "You're taller."

"Two inches since last summer."

"Wow. Almost as tall as me."

"Yep."

"So any plans for the summer?"

"No. I haven't thought about it."

"I'm going to fly with your sister out West."

"That'll be fun for you guys."

"Shall I get us some lunch?"

I hesitate.

"We could have salad and I've got some of your father's knishes."

"Sure, that'd be great."

She gets up and goes into the house.

I wander across the lawn, the soles of my feet pressing into the cool green and then settle under the willow trees. I lean against the trunk and take the canister of fossils and dirt out of my pocket and pour them onto the cover of my *Chumash*. I finger them, imagine the heat they've been exposed to, the pounding water carving that enormous depth in the middle of desert, sand

stretching across the horizon, layered like a cake. I squeeze the shells tight. I've got love in my fingers, ocean in my hands, gravity here in my palms.

Spring

Chapter 10

Bubbie comes for *Shabbos* the last week before school ends. We eat dinner with the sun still shining, and the windows open to the song birds. Bubbie's silver hair is cut shorter, her low neckline revealing her tanned chest and a small diamond pendant. Her long nails are the same hot pink as her blouse and her high heel sandals.

"I was thinking I'd help Neshama get settled out in Victoria."

"That would be fine." Abba's voice is formal. "Thank you."

Neshama wears a short sleeve T-shirt and a long slit skirt.

"And I was thinking Ellie'd come along, make a holiday of it."

I sit bolt upright. "I get to go? To the sea?"

"If your father allows you to go-"

"Oh please, please, please." I leap out of the chair and kneel by Abba. "Please let me go.

I'll wear whatever you want and I'll only eat kosher and please."

Abba stares at me, eyes uncertain. "I'll think about it."

"Abba I *have* to go.

"Why are you so anxious?"

"It's the sea."

"She's been dying to go forever," Neshama says.

"You know, the fish thing," Bubbie explains.

"Except I think it's more just the little critters at the shore," Neshama beams at me.

"She has asked to go for years." Ima adds.

"Enough, *sha*. I said, I'd think about it."

"It's fine with me, Ellie."

I turn to Ima, "Really?"

"Sure. You went away with Bubbie last summer and it was fine, wasn't it?"

I blush.

"Yes, it was excellent," Bubbie says. "We had a great time, didn't we? We'll get your sister settled in Victoria and then we'll explore the seashore for creatures."

I do a small dance, wiggling my hips and shoulders. "I'm going to the sea!"

I'll see rocks eroded by waves in small whirlpool clefts. I'll peer into tide pools and see hermit crabs scuttle, the stillness followed by the sudden dart of tide pool sculpin. Bull kelp will wave in long tangly strands and the shore will be squishy with rock lettuce. And when the tide goes really far out I'll be able to find sea stars and sea cucumbers and and and. "Check it out." I pull up my sleeve and flex for Neshama, grunting. Abba's mouth falls open. Ima breaks into laughter.

"So I can go Abba, please?"

He looks down, moves his fork across his plate.

"What are you so worried about?" Bubbie folds her arms across her chest.

"I kept kosher last time. And I prayed and kept *Shabbos*."

"I'm worried about other things."

"Well, what?"

Abba blushes.

Ima glances at him and then nods. "You're worried about boys. That's it, isn't it?"

Neshama spits a mouthful of red wine onto her dinner plate.

"I'm an excellent chaperone," Bubbie says. "We had no problems last summer."

Neshama starts to giggle so hard she chokes. I grab her arm and pounding her back, drag her into the kitchen.

"I'm sorry Ellie," she snorts.

"Sh!"

I stand behind the closed swinging door.

"Let's do the final scene from *Dirty Dancing*. You be Baby – go sit in the corner, and I'll be Patrick Swayze."

"I'm trying to listen."

"Don't worry, you'll get to go. As long as you promise, no boys," she slaps a hand against her thigh.

"Shut up." I elbow her in the ribs. She gets me in a headlock, rubs her knuckles over my scalp. I shrink, try and tickle her. She whoops, giggling. We knock over a chair.

"Girls?" Bubbie swings the door open.

We look up, still wrapped around each other, tittering. Our hair is mussed, our clothes askew.

"What are you doing?"

"Wrestling." I pin Neshama against the wall by the phone.

Bubbie pauses, "Oh. Well I have to go. Canasta," she says loudly. Then she whispers, "Before they start praying again." She points toward the dining room.

Neshama wriggles one arm out of my grasp. "You won't stay for dessert?"

"No, stop by tomorrow. We'll talk about our trip."

I let go of Neshama. "I get to go?"

Bubbie nods.

I fling my arms around Bubbie, smack a noisy kiss on her rouged cheek. Neshama stumbles, and then squeezes her arms around the both of us.

"Okay, enough with the love," Bubbie grimaces.

"Love, a force like gravity!"

"What?"

"Never mind. Wanna see my triceps?" I roll up my sleeve. Bubbie pokes my arm, "Wow. Push ups?"

"Yep."

We kiss Bubbie goodbye and bring the fruit platter into the dining room.

Ima looks at me. "You can go."

"Thank you." I wrap my arms around her and then give Abba a quick kiss on the cheek.

"You're welcome." She dishes pineapple out onto plates.

"What are you guys going to do this summer?"

"I'm teaching a summer course," Abba says. He looks at Ima, "Nu?"

Ima doesn't answer.

"Are you going to tell them?" He asks.

Ima blushes and puts down her fork. "I have a new plan."

I freeze, fork in mid-air. "For what?"

"You know, helping people be more observant."

"What's that?" I ask.

"I'm going to be teaching a class about women and Judaism this fall."

I look at Abba. He smiles at us.

"More anti-dating?" Neshama asks.

"Yes, and other things too."

"I also finished my book, it's more of a pamphlet. The Jewish Renewal Centre is going to publish it."

"Congratulations! I can't wait to read it." I get up from the table and give Ima a hug.

"Thanks Ellie."

"That's great Ima," Neshama says.

"I want one thing from all of you before the summer." Ima pauses, "I want you to come to *shul* with me. My *shul*."

"That's it?" Neshama blurts.

"That's it."

Neshama nods, "No problem."

"Avram?"

"What kind of *shul*?"

"Orthodox."

He pauses, "I'll think about it."

After dinner Neshama and I head to the back porch. The chestnut tree blooms, the leaves green and full, small white tufts like popcorn. The forsythia in Mrs. Fidderman's yard next door has thrust golden and peaked, her lawn littered with magnolia petals.

We sit on the stairs drinking tea. A breeze blows, ruffling our hair.

"Ellie why do you want to be near the sea? You've never even seen it."

"It's not just the sea, I want to see tide pools."

"Shells and seaweed?"

"Yes, but also jellyfish and sea stars, red and purple and-"

"But what do you like about it?"

"Well," I draw my knees into my chest. "The sea is never the same. Each time the tide comes in its different, a different mollusk, or in a different place, but it's always a kind of balance. And when the tide changes the plants and animals adjust." Neshama raises her eyebrows. "Like seaweed, it retains water and stays damp."

"That interests you? Dampness?"

I sigh. "No, I like the way it... fluctuates."

"So you're just interested in the change?" Neshama looks at me skeptically.

"Well, yes, and that it finds a new equilibrium. Balance."

"It changes and it's the same?"

"Exactly."

Neshama groans.

"Look at this." I pull out the canister of shells Ima brought from Israel and pour them into my hand.

"What about them?"

"Ima found them in the middle of the desert."

"Yeah so?"

"Well that means the ocean was there once."

"And?"

"Well, it's like the stamp of *Hashem*."

"Oh, don't start with the God crap."

"No this is huge. Forget the bible and Abba's rules. There are shells in the desert. Don't you get it? The ocean and land came before all that."

"Didn't you already know that, dinosaur girl?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter who owns it or puts up buildings. *Hashem* is first in nature, not in the temples or laws done in his honour."

"And that's why you want to see the ocean?"

"Partly, and 'cuz it's beautiful."

Neshama flicks her hair over shoulder. "If you say so."

We're silent a moment. "I think I'll climb the tree." I put down my mug on the porch.

Neshama watches me swing myself up into the arch of branches, settle in the crook of the tree.

"You know what I want?" I say.

"What's that?"

"I want everything Ima says in her book about how to get married."

"You do?"

"Yep."

"El, you don't want to marry some *yeshiva bucher* Abba chooses for you."

"That's not what I mean. I want someone to say, 'I think I know someone who'd be perfect for you.' And then I'd like to meet that person and talk to them until I know if they were my *b'shert*."

"And if they were?"

"Then I'd hold their hand."

"You're a nut."

"No I'm not." I pull a chestnut leaf off the tree, carefully tear it along its threads.

Neshama tips her head. "What Ima said is about men."

"Not necessarily."

"Ellie gimme a break."

"So it's a little unconventional. You never know."

"You're practical and yet *such* a dreamer." Neshama stands up.

"I want everything."

"And you think you can have it?"

"I think I can."

Neshama smiles and shakes her head.

I want a nice girl in a long purple dress who likes trees and who knows all the *Shabbos* blessings. I want a girl with hair and legs like Sarah, and as smart as Neshama and with as wicked a tongue as Bubbie. And we'll live by the sea.

The last day of school dawns sticky and hot. "I'm never wearing this uniform again!" Neshama twirls across the kitchen, her skirt fanning out. She rolls it over at the waist until her knees show.

"I have a surprise for you."

"A-huh." Neshama digs into a grapefruit.

"Just you wait."

"Sure." Neshama bounces in her chair.

"I have a question you're going to like for Q and A."

"Really?" She puts down her spoon. "You're not going to ask-"

"Maybe."

"Tell me."

I smile and turn away.

"Ellie." She stands up and grabs my waist, starts tickling me.

"Okay, okay, stop. It's about the land, the land."

"You mean why it's only for us?"

"No."

"What then?"

"You'll have to wait." I stick out my tongue.

We file into the library after lunch, our voices louder than usual. Rabbi Lowenstein always tries to talk about *Tisha B'Av* on the last day of the school since we don't have classes during the summer, but no one can muster the proper mourning attitude because of the holidays.

"Are there any questions?" Rabbi Lowenstein scans the rows of girls. The back of my skirt sticks to my thighs, the vinyl seat hot and sweaty. The fans above swirl the humid air. Traffic noise wafts through the open windows. Rabbi Lowenstein's eyes rests briefly on Neshama. I hesitate and then raise my hand. All eyes turn to me. "Ellisheva, a question? Good." He smiles and beckons for me to come up to the podium. I take out my *Chumash* and get my notes out of my skirt. I rest my shaking hands on the flat wooden surface. Neshama watches me, her hands tucked under her knees, her blue eyes intent. I smile at her, take a deep breath and spread my notes in front of me.

"I want to ask about what the *Torah* has to say," I pause, clearing my throat, "about the environment. We face growing problems of air, land and water pollution. I've been trying to find some answers in my *Chumash*. At first glance, I don't think the *Torah* is very concerned with

how we treat the land at all, just as Jews that we claim it as a people as our own. I know people weren't worried about the environment back then, they were nomadic, but I did come up with some helpful passages."

I glance at Reb Lowenstein. He nods for me to continue.

"For example, if you'll turn to *Shofetim* 20:2, you'll see it outlines rules for protecting trees during times of warfare."

I look up at Neshama. She beams back at me.

In the evening the fading sun slants across the folding chairs at Ima's synagogue. A warm breeze blows through open windows. We stand for the prayers, Ima on my left and Neshama on my right. Ima sings, "*havou le donai*" and Neshama's voice rises with hers. I turn to stare at her, listening to her voice low and sweet, climbing around the notes. I join in too. Ima's smile stretches wide, her eyes sparkling. Neshama winks at me, and turns to show me her fingers tightly crossed behind her back. Abba's head looms just over the screen, bearded and flushed with the heat. I hear his voice loud and gruff with ours, "*Sing the song of David, render the prayer unto him.*"

Rows ahead I notice a girl, her brown shoulder exposed in a tank top. Springy black curls tumble down a lithe neck and brush against muscular arms. She turns around, catching my eye. She has sparkly brown eyes, dark skin and full cheeks. Heat climbs up my face, my arm hair rising. I don't look away.

Vita Auctoris

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